

On·Spec

The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing
SUMMER 1996

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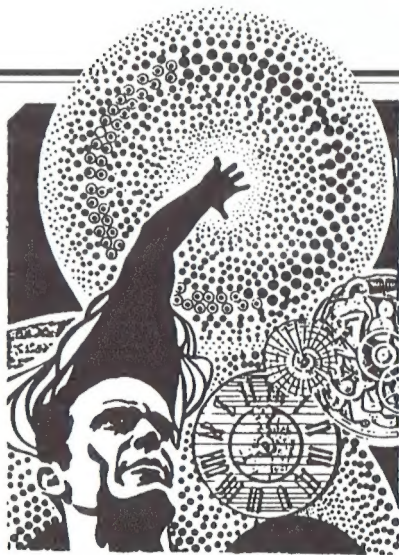


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"The Last Lesson" – Tanya HUFF
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ON·SPEC

SUMMER 1996

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ON this Issue

Coming Home

Jena Snyder, Production Editor

This past weekend as I was heading out to our family lake cabin, I felt a deep sense of satisfaction, a sense of coming home, not just to a physical place, but to a sense of stability and inspiration.

For me, the lake is paradise, offering solitude and what every writer treasures most: uninterrupted blocks of time in which to think and write. I've always loved the thunderstorms, the grebes "cree-ee-eking" out on the water, the smell of woodsmoke. I don't even mind roughing it—going without running water till mid-May, seeing my breath in the morning when I make coffee—as long as I can plant myself in a worn and sprung old chair and work till either (a) my rear end falls asleep or (b) my eyes give out.

What struck me this weekend was how much of the lake has crept into my writing over the years and how, more and more, I'm going back to my roots for inspiration: I've set stories in the cabin where my grandparents celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary, the same cabin where my dad learned to walk holding onto the railing of the screened-in porch; I've based characters on neighbors and friends of the family, many long gone. When I started writing, however, high fantasy was my genre of choice and, as part of the portfolio required for W.O. Mitchell and Doug Barbour's Creative Writing class at U of A, I included a fantasy novel.

Bad choice. W.O. flatly refused to accept anything "fantastic" from a girl born and raised in small-town Alberta. "You can only write what you know!" he insisted. How could I possibly invent new countries, entire races, otherworldly animals? No, if it wasn't Alberta, WASPs and deer and antelope playing, it wasn't allowed. Worse, what you wrote for his part of the class had to be *real*: although you could (maybe) embellish a situation (slightly) or change the order of natural events, you couldn't make something up. I felt secretly vindicated when he once praised a piece I'd written that was almost complete fiction. In it, things didn't happen the way I wrote them; but they were still real in almost every sense of the word because he *believed* they were real.

Driving out to the lake this weekend, thinking about roots and home and how my own writing has evolved, I came to the conclusion that although W.O. was wrong about a number of other things, he was dead on with "Write what you know." Imagination isn't enough to really sell a story to an editor (and I'm not just talking money

ON SPEC DEADLINES

Aug. 31/96, Nov. 30/96,
Feb. 28/97, May 31/97

Submissions received after a
deadline will be held for the
next deadline.

All submissions must be in
COMPETITION FORMAT: no author
name on manuscript. Enclose self-
addressed, stamped envelope with
sufficient postage to cover return of
manuscript (or mark "Disposable"
and include SASE for reply only),
and covering letter with name,
address, phone number, story title
and word count. Details, page 95.

ON SPEC Ad Deadlines:

Aug 15 WINTER issue
Nov. 15 SPRING issue
Feb. 15 SUMMER issue
May 15 FALL issue

ON SPEC Ad Rates:

Classified (per word) \$1
1/4 pg./bus. card \$75
1/2 pg. \$125
Full pg. \$175
Inside front or back
cover (b & w) \$225
Back cover (4-color) \$500

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here), and detailed research isn't enough, either. You can read about New Orleans, the Jurassic period, the weather in Antarctica, but mere details won't sell a story. It's that *real* quality that does. Here at *ON SPEC* we've seen stories where the research and detail is impeccable, but the stories still have a flatness to them.

What is missing is that sense of *home*, of the authors really knowing what they're writing about, who they're writing about. The characters in the stories we do buy act and react believably because they are inspired by real people. A scene may be set on Mars, but the author has incorporated personal knowledge—how it feels to have a cat brush up against a shower-wet leg, the way molten chocolate tastes in cookies fresh out of the oven, what your stomach does when a small plane hits an air pocket—into an imaginary setting.

Coming back to my own roots, especially to a place so rich in sights, smells, experiences, made me realize how important those roots are. I'm not restricted to writing about small-town Alberta any more than someone in downtown Toronto is limited to writing exclusively about big city life, or any writer is restricted to writing about human life on earth. As writers, we just have to transpose the reality of what we do know to a situation of our own making, no matter how fantastic, no matter how many light years away. If we put part of ourselves into the work—who we are, where we've been, what we know—it becomes real.

•

SANDRA KASTURI: winner of our second annual Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize

We are both pleased and proud to announce that SANDRA KASTURI, whose poetry has been featured in a number of issues of *ON SPEC* (including this one: see pp. 31 and 87), has won the second annual Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize.

Sandra's poetry has appeared in *Contemporary Verse 2*, *TransVersions*, and several issues of *ON SPEC*. She is currently editing an anthology of speculative poetry entitled *The Stars As Seen From This Particular Angle of Night*. She is also working on a screenplay, her own collection of verse, a series of modernized Estonian folktales, but not at novel.

Congratulations, Sandra!

•

What reviewers are saying about us...

We've had a number of great reviews come in for our anthology, *ON SPEC: The First Five Years*, and wanted to share them.

Fantasy and Science Fiction said: "The *ON SPEC* Editorial Collective's goal was to show to the world a unique Canadian voice, inspired by various cultures, mythos, and archetypes, and to do so in a way that was accessible to everyone, not just literary types and genre fanatics. ... The editorial collective proved its point. Canadian speculative fiction is multi-layered, sharp, bold, sometimes cruel, and sometimes lovely."

And *Prairie Fire* had praise for us as well: "*ON SPEC: The First Five Years* is one of the most consistently strong anthologies I've read in a while. ... In terms of tone and content, the anthology is all over the map. And I mean that as a compliment. Speculative fiction is not just science fiction, and while the latter is perhaps dominant here, horror and fantasy, with approaches varying from light to deep pitch (and sometimes both at once), are also represented."

Both the anthology and the cover artists, Steve Fahnstalk and Lynne Taylor Fahnstalk, have been nominated for Aurora Awards this year. I'm keeping my fingers crossed (although it's rather difficult to type that way...). •

•

Notes from our contributors:

TIM HAMMELL, one of our previous art directors and illustrators, sent this news: "Just though I would let you know that the dino boy image (retitled 'Wild, Wild West') which scored high in the photographic print salon last fall, is one of three of my images to be published in the 48TH ANNUAL PRINT EXHIBIT BOOK this fall. This is a prestigious, full color, hardcover coffee table book that only prints the high scoring and trophy prints from the national salon. ... The second crossover image is one that won me a national trophy for airbrushing and was chosen for the LOAN COLLECTION, an exhibit of prints which is travelling across the country for a year. The other big news is I'm disappearing for a couple of months to work on art for a calendar for Harley-Davidson Motorcycles that will also be out in the fall."

KENNETH SCOTT, whose illustration for "Johann Havel's Marvelous Machine" appears on page 8, recently won L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of the Future contest and will appearing in volume XII of *Writers of the Future*, due out in May. *ON SPEC* readers and art aficionados will vividly recall his cover for our "Over the Edge" issue (Spring 1993).

•

About our Cover Artist: GEORGE BARR

Currently residing in Livermore, CA (U.S.A.), GEORGE BARR has been working in the SF/F field for thirty-five years and is still happily surprised when anyone shows a willingness to publish what he paints. Nearing age 60, he has no plans to retire as long as there's a market for his work.

Prairie Fire POETRY CONTEST

Entry fee: \$24 (includes 1-year subscription to *Prairie Fire*).

Prizes: \$300, \$200, \$100 plus payment for publication.

Length: Up to three poems.

Entries must be postmarked no later than **September 30, 1996**.

Submissions previously published or accepted for publication elsewhere are not eligible. • Entrants' anonymity is preserved throughout. Please include name and address on a separate page.

Judge: Anne Szumigalski.

PRAIRIE FIRE, 423-100 Arthur Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 1H3

Prairie Fire SHORT FICTION CONTEST

Entry fee: \$24 (includes 1-year subscription to *Prairie Fire*).

Prizes: \$300, \$200, \$100 plus payment for publication.

Length: 500-5,000 words.

Entries must be postmarked no later than **June 30, 1996**.

Submissions previously published or accepted for publication elsewhere are not eligible. • Entrants' anonymity is preserved throughout. Please include name and address on a separate page.

Judge: Merna Summers.

PRAIRIE FIRE, 423-100 Arthur Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 1H3

Prairie Fire MICRO FICTION CONTEST

Entry fee: \$24 (includes 1-year subscription to *Prairie Fire*).

Prizes: up to 5 x \$100 plus payment for publication.

Length: Up to three pieces of no more than 500 words.

Deadline: November 30, 1996.

Submissions previously published or accepted for publication elsewhere are not eligible. • Entrants' anonymity is preserved throughout. Please include name and address on a separate page.

Judge: David Arnason.

PRAIRIE FIRE, 423-100 Arthur Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 1H3



Winner of the 1994 Aurora Award for Best Short Work (French)

Originally published in French in *Solaris* 107, 1993, as

“La merveilleuse machine de Johann Havel”

Translated by Yves Meynard

Johann Havel's Marvelous Machine

Yves Meynard

illustrated by Kenneth Scott

The house on the Sommerstrass

Along a sloping gutter a young man crawled painfully. It had not rained in Wessendam for days on end: beneath him the stones were dry and gritty with dust. Autumn's first dead leaves, which lay at the bottom of the gutter, crumbled under his palms and the largest fragments stung his flesh like needles.

To his left and to his right the high houses of Wessendam leaned over him, as if calling down mute imprecations. The gutter was barely half as wide as his body, and the alley at whose center the gutter lay was no more than three feet wide: a passageway necessary but ignored, if not despised, separating the back of a house on the Sommerstrass from that of its counterpart on the Herbstestrass.

In accordance with this contempt, no windows opened in the back of the houses, save a tiny round aperture just below the roof and a pair of low windows, barred with black iron, a few inches from the ground. Impossible to beg help there, assuming help might have been granted. He would have to climb the alley to its summit—to descend would have led him straight to the icy waters of the Schwarze Kanal and the drowning that had haunted his nightmares since childhood.

He stopped crawling for a moment to wipe with his shirtsleeve the blood that dripped from his nostrils. He wanted to stand up, but each time he had tried it, he had not managed three steps before the alley's slope vanquished him. The ghost of a sob escaped him, but he pursed his lips and compelled himself to silence. He was

too old to cry now, even after having been beaten within an inch of his life. He would reach the end of the alley, and cross the little square on top of the hill, and he would descend the Ligeiastrass to the inventor's house, and only there, in the arms of the old man, would he allow himself to cry.

He began to crawl once more: right arm, left leg, left arm—agony in his elbow, the club might have broken the bone—right leg... He heard a buzzing sound getting louder and louder, but he believed it existed only under his own skull, until his hand came down upon the wasp's nest and broke it.

The swarm rose about him, singing a metallic hymn to pain. The young man cried out in distress and rage; he rose trembling to his feet, took two steps away from the nest and then collapsed again, rolled to fetch up against one of the basement windows of a house on the Sommerstrass. He saw with supernal clarity the first wasp land on his hand, raise its abdomen and bury its stinger, again and again. The venom spread its burn through his flesh.

There was a clink at his back, then a jangle of metal, and the feeling of emptiness... Two hands grasped him, one at the shoulder, one at his belt, and a female voice cried: "Help me, I can't pull you inside alone!" The young man bent double and pushed laterally with his arms and legs—a cluster of burns on his right thigh, a drop of lava on his ankle, the insects converging toward his eyes—and suddenly he fell vertiginously, slammed against a wooden bench, a farewell blow, dropped to the ground and rolled to a stop, his face against a cold and damp stone floor.

The jangle of metal came again, then the voice rose once more: "Help me if you can, we have to put the pane back

or these horrors will come in."

Indeed, the insects' buzzing had not stopped; the young man raised his head laboriously and saw, against a luminous sky streaked with black from the window bars, the nest's scouts wander inside. He rose to his feet, but had to sit down heavily on the bench to avoid collapsing again; he didn't have the strength to help his rescuer put back into place the glass pane that sealed the window's opening.

Four or five wasps had been able to enter the room. Apparently disoriented by the passage from light into shadow, they flew about at random. The young woman seized a notebook from the top of a pile of folios and slammed it methodically upon the insects. When she had killed the last wasp, she took up a candle in a copper holder and turned to him. "Are you all right?"

He did not answer. His poor head was too busy. He had barely had the time to understand that he was in the basement of one of the aristocratic houses of the Sommerstrass. And now that he saw his rescuer face to face, he had to exert additional effort to grasp that this could not be one of the servants; that it must be the daughter of the house, however incongruous her presence in the basement might be.

She knelt to look at him closer; her face, in the candlelight, was like an icon. "You haven't been too badly stung," she said. And because this sentence did not call for comment, he was able to say: "No, *Damoiselle*."

"What is your name?"

"Pieter Havel, *Damoiselle*."

"Why were you beaten, Pieter?"

He opened his mouth to lie, but the young woman's dark eyes tore the truth from him: "Because I rejected the head cook's advances; he got revenge by ac-

cusing me of stealing from my masters."

The young woman's face expressed pity and anger. "If you can stand up," she said, "I'll take you to a more suitable bed than this bench."

He protested: "No, *Damoiselle*, I must return home, I can't stay here—"

"In the state you're in, it would be a crime to make you walk more than ten yards. There is a room just beyond that door; I'll help you walk."

He rose; she put her arm around his waist and supported him as he staggered. Her body was tall, straight and slim, and from her warm flesh rose a floral perfume, a kaleidoscope of roses and jasmine. To his shame, Pieter felt his own body, however stung and beaten, reacting ardently to the young woman's contact.

She opened the door, which gave onto a small windowless room, three-quarters filled by a bed and a small chest of drawers. She laid Pieter on the bed, and transferred the flame of her candle to the wick of a candle stub in a faceted pink quartz bowl.

"My father had this room built for me when I was little," she explained. "I want you to rest; I will come back to see you once you've slept."

She went out and shut the door behind herself. A pinkish light filled the tiny room, flickering in time with the flame; it seemed to Pieter that the light was like a balm. He felt his eyes close; a slight vertigo took him, he no longer knew if he was awake or asleep, the walls that surrounded him had become insubstantial. He heard the door opening and the young voice telling him "My name is Anna." Then he slept.

A night and a dawn

The sun set. Pieter slept in the bed that was too small for him, his sleep tor-

mented by exhaustion and the wasps' venom. Two floors up in the vast house on the Sommerstrass, Anna went to find Stefan, the only one of the servants she trusted fully. She told him in a few words what had happened, swore him to silence, and asked him to go see to the young man.

Stefan descended the stairs to the basement, and went to the little room Anna's father had had made for her tenth birthday, yielding to one more of his only daughter's many whims. For a long while he looked at Pieter, who moaned deep in his throat; then he roused himself. He undressed Pieter without awakening him, cleaned and bandaged his wounds. When he was done, he covered the young man up as best he could; Pieter's sleep was no longer agitated. Stefan heaved a deep sigh, half-pained, half-satisfied, then blew out the candle stub.

He went to report to his mistress; he was about to knock at her door when another domestic gestured for him to wait: the lady of the house, he explained in a murmur, was in conference with her daughter about tomorrow evening's reception, and she was not very happy. Stefan nodded in understanding and waited. From beyond the door came the sounds of a tense conversation, and a few outcries quickly repressed.

"I cannot understand you," Anna's mother was saying. "The son of the Dynast himself is coming here tomorrow evening to meet you, and you treat it as something trivial, even boring! You still have no idea what you will wear, or how you will arrange your hair. You empty-headed child! Are you telling me you wouldn't like to be the future Dynast's wife?"

"The son of the Dynast," said Anna in a chill voice, "is thirty-two; I am

seventeen. I have little interest in someone twice my age, even if he were the Dynast himself."

"This is unbelievable," said Anna's mother, who had married a man ten years her senior for his money, and had never forgiven herself. "How have we brought you up? Your father always yields to your caprices, he's spoiled you rotten. Anyone else would sell her soul for the chance to spend a quarter of an hour with Radulf, and you turn up your nose at him!"

Anna capitulated. "I didn't say that. I will wear the white and gold dress, the one that goes so well with my complexion, and I will arrange my hair the way it was on my fifteenth birthday, the style that you liked so much. And I promise to be polite to Radulf—but I won't throw myself at him."

Appeased, Anna's mother allowed herself to be magnanimous: "Poor child! I never asked you to behave like a young ninny, only to be your usual charming self. You'll see, Radulf is a wonderful man; as soon as you meet him, he'll turn your head." She rose to leave and smiled a fake smile at her daughter.

When she had left, Anna made claws of her fingers and buried them in her pillow. "A wonderful man' whom we want to see you marry, dear daughter, for our own glory and fortune. You will be happy with him, because we order it."

There was a knock at the door; Anna started, went to the door and opened it on Stefan. "It's you! How is he?" she whispered, as she let the servant enter.

"He is in pain, even in his sleep, but none of his wounds are dangerous to his health. He is at an age when one doesn't die."

"I want you to see to him every two hours, make sure everything is going well. When he wakes up, come tell me,

I want to speak to him myself."

"Yes, Damoiselle." Stefan understood the feelings that roiled within the young woman: concern for another person, which she had never been able to truly express up to now; the childish pleasure of having a secret of her very own; and especially the desire to act contrary to her parents' wishes; they would have been appalled to see her worry about the fate of a servant. She would have done as well, and probably better, to send Pieter to one of the Heilendhäuser, where a doctor would have seen to him; but Stefan would never have dreamed of blaming his mistress for her decision.

The stars spun in the night sky, whirling around the axis that transpierced Polaris. Anna yielded to sleep within her silken bedclothes; she dreamed of Radulf, the son of the Dynast of Neuerland, and her dreams were not pleasant.

In his house on the Ligeiastrass, the old inventor Johann Havel busied himself about the time machine to which he had devoted nearly twenty years. He sat on the black leather seat, spun the pedals through a few revolutions. Above his head, the vast horizontal gear pivoted about its axis, imitating the celestial sphere, and the stars, the comets and the moons of shining metal hung to the rim of the gear began to spin. Johann Havel let the movement of the cogs stop by itself, then climbed down from the seat. He felt in the grip of a slight vertigo, as if he had just come out of sleep or was falling into it. The walls of his house seemed to become insubstantial. He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead on the cool glass of the window a moment, then he went to sit heavily in a faded velvet armchair. Morning sunlight surprised him; he had no awareness of having slept.

The orphan

Pieter woke up. His bruised body seemed to have rusted like the gears of the old clock on the Starkplatz that had forever stopped at half-past noon. He threw off the sheets and extracted himself from the too-small bed.

The room was plunged into darkness. Pieter felt for the candle stub; his fingers encountered a metal tray on which lay a quarter-loaf of bread, slices of ham, a wedge of cheese and a full carafe. He was so hungry that he did not bother to search further for the candle, and feasted in the darkness.

Once his belly was full, he found the block of quartz and half a dozen matches. He struck one aflame, then lit the wick. In the pink light, he examined his injuries: they had been cleaned and bandaged, the wasp stings had been rubbed with a medicinal unguent. Despite the unguent, the numerous purple swellings were still tender; the surrounding flesh was burning hot.

Pieter sat on the bed and endeavored to put his clothes back on. He hadn't been aware he had been undressed. Who had done this? At the thought it might have been Anna, he felt a flush rise to his cheeks, but the fantasy, delightful though it might be, was certainly false. He finished buttoning up his vest, all scraped and torn by his trip along the gutter.

What now? He could stay here no longer. He must return to his home. He would certainly never see Anna again, but this was in the order of things.

He pushed the door open and entered the house's basement, cluttered with books, nailed crates, furniture draped with dust-sheets. Daylight entered by the barred windows; the morning was already well advanced, he had slept far too long. As he navigated among the

clutter, Pieter had a brief vision of Anna as a child, playing among these treasures, and he suddenly understood why she had asked for a room of her own to be built among what had to have been to her a place of wonders.

Without warning, he was seized with weakness; he was suddenly drenched in sweat, and felt his muscles were about to go limp. He heard two voices approaching and held on just long enough to collapse into the arms of the liveried servant who accompanied Anna.

He did not lose consciousness. The servant brought him back to the little room and put him back into bed. Anna said: "We were lucky to be here at the right time, Stefan. Did he think to leave in secret?"

Pieter made himself open his eyes. "Damoiselle, I have already taken up enough of your time. I must return home, I cannot..."

"What you cannot do right now is get out of bed. Besides, where would your home be, if you've been dismissed?"

In that instant, Pieter wished, with an intensity that astounded himself, that the servant go away. And, miraculously, Stefan left the room and shut the door.

"Do you have a place to stay?" insisted Anna.

Pieter, recovered from his momentary astonishment, answered: "Yes, Damoiselle. My adoptive father will let me stay with him. I don't want to be a burden to you." Horror took him as he said those words. Would she interpret them as an insult, a suggestion that she did not have the financial means to take care of him? He opened his mouth to explain himself better, but too many words spun inside his head, and he could only stammer two or three random syllables.

"Calm down. Wasp venom lasts a long time: until tonight, you will pay

dearly for any efforts, like standing up and walking." Anna did not look insulted in the least, amused rather. Pieter made himself slow down his breathing.

"Forgive me, Damoiselle."

"There is nothing to forgive. You worked for the Achingers, didn't you? No, I didn't speak to them. I simply sent Stefan to gather news early this morning and he heard a rumor about some scandal at their house."

Pieter shut his eyes, as much from exhaustion as to tear his gaze away from Anna's face, whose very beauty wounded him.

There was a moment of silence, broken by Anna: "Open your eyes," she asked in a suddenly changed voice. Pieter obeyed. She leaned above him; their gazes locked and her perfume filled his nostrils again. She bit her lower lip as if to prevent herself from speaking, but she couldn't contain herself.

"He's your father, isn't he?"

"What, Damoiselle?"

She sighed, embarrassed. "You said that you would stay at your adoptive father's house; you're an orphan?"

"Yes, Damoiselle; from birth. I grew up at the Krug orphanage, and Johann Havel adopted me when I was three years old. Damoiselle, what are you talking about?"

Anna sighed again and lowered her gaze. "Stefan is your father. You didn't notice? Myself, it took me a while, perhaps because of your bruises, but you have the same face. The same eyes. You are his son."

Pieter stayed silent.

"I never believed in destiny, but now, I don't know. What were the chances that you would come by accident to the very house where your father lives? Do you want me to call him?"

Embarrassment was plain on Anna's

face. Pieter shook his head no. The idea of having met his father without knowing it, the perspective of asking him all he had never known... He would never be able to do it.

"Damoiselle, I beg you, don't tell him anything. I don't want..."

"He already knows. I saw it by the way he looked at you; he knows who you are. But I promise you I will say nothing. For now, rest; we will speak later."

She left swiftly; almost, she fled.

Pieter forced himself to be calm. He must conserve his strength, avoid yielding to exhaustion. He would rest a while longer, then he would leave without telling anyone, and never more come near this house, he never wanted to see again the man who had abandoned him at his birth, he did not want to know, not anything, not ever...

An aristocratic doll

Pieter awoke; he had no awareness of having slept. His body still pained him, but he could wait no longer. A set of brand-new clothes in his size lay on the foot of the bed. For long seconds, he hovered on the edge of tearing the clothes to shreds, but finally decided to wear them. He thought he detected a ghost of Anna's scent in the fabric. He made a small bundle of his old clothes and opened the door. This time, he would leave the house without collapsing.

Night had fallen; the basement was dark. Pieter wandered again among the objects that cluttered it. Feeling his way by touch, he eventually reached stairs that led to the ground floor. A little light filtered from the top of the steps. Snatches of music came to his ears. A celebration? Perhaps he could leave the way he had come in, through the

window—but the thought of finding himself back in the alley was unbearable. He would find a door, leave without being seen. If ever he should encounter Stefan... He could not imagine what he would do.

When Anna came down from her room, her mother uttered a cluck of satisfaction at whose core lay a jealousy she was not truly aware of. In her white and gold dress, Anna seemed to glow with a light of her own. The young woman's brown hair fell in cascades on her shoulders, the gold of the dress reflected within it. Mother and daughter went to the parlor where Anna's father was already seated on a divan, forehead flushed and beaded with sweat, so terrified was he by the visit of the Dynast's son.

Herr Holtz smiled weakly at the sight of his daughter and watched her sit on an armchair, arranging her dress about her with perfect ease. Anna crossed her wrists on her knees and tilted her head slightly to one side. She knew only too well that she projected the idealized image of the expectant young virgin; but the sarcasm was perceptible only to herself, her parents saw only the fulfillment of their expectations. Anna's father wiped his forehead with a large handkerchief then gave a signal; a quartet of musicians began to play softly.

Above the muffled clanging of the tall clock's pendulum came eight strokes of its bell. Anna refused to think about the Dynast's son. In his place, she kept seeing images of Pieter, and Stefan. Tomorrow morning, or tonight, after Radulf's visit, she would go speak to the young man. Apologize for having fled after delivering her revelation. Why had she not kept her tongue! Too proud of her cleverness, she had boasted of it, without thinking of the pain she might cause

to the young man. He had deserved better.

The sound of the main door's knocker made its way to the parlor, above the sighs of the violins. Herr Holtz grew flushed once more, his wife began to fan herself furiously. Anna remained motionless, in the same attitude as before.

A servant entered the room, announcing the arrival of His Dynastic Highness, Radulf. Anna's parents rose then bowed. Anna paused, long enough for her still-bowing father to dart her a terrified glance, then she rose and executed a curtsy so perfect as to be mechanical.

Radulf bowed in turn and sat down in the armchair that had been brought forward for him. Anna gazed at him coolly. She saw a man almost twice her age, rather fleshy, with a thick beard, widely-spaced blue eyes. A man burning with an inner flame imperfectly hidden. A man she could only fear.

Anna's parents, after an exchange of courtesies, began to make conversation, bringing up one insipid subject after another. Radulf answered politely, always to the point, but it was evident to Anna that he paid no attention to what was being said. He watched her constantly, with an intensity that made her shiver. Anna took care to remain fixed in the same posture, a large-as-life doll. She only opened her mouth when the conversation demanded it. Sometimes Radulf would ask her a direct question, and then she would answer in three or four words. God, if only he could think of her as haughty and stupid! But the future Dynast's fascination seemed not to decrease in the slightest. How could she have affected him to that extent? He had seen her only from afar the first time, as she climbed up into her family's carriage. It seemed that glimpse must have been sufficient.

The great clock measured the flow of time. It struck nine. Ten. How long would this torment last? Delicate pastries had been eaten, fine wines drunk. In Anna's mouth it all tasted of ashes.

Finally, she heard Radulf ask her the question she had dreaded since his arrival.

"Damoiselle Anna, would you do me the pleasure of accompanying me to the ball Friday next?"

She remained silent for an instant. From the corner of her eye, she could see her father trembling in his armchair. She knew what she was meant to answer; and what else could she say? Yet, when the moment came to utter the inevitable yes, something in her rebelled. A terrible heat filled her. Keeping her face frozen into a porcelain mask, she heard herself answer "I regret, Highness, but I fear this will not be possible."

Her mother barely managed to transform a yelp into a discreet cough.

"And why not, Damoiselle?"

Anna wanted to scream; she said, in a colorless voice: "I have been feeling very ill these past few days and I fear to catch cold."

"I am saddened to hear it." Radulf's voice terrified her. He was not insulted, he was not angered. It was an emotion far more powerful and dangerous that inhabited him. Against this passion, she was powerless. She understood now that she had made an irreparable mistake from the very start. She should have yielded, prostrated herself at his feet and abandoned her virginity to him at the first excuse; he would have gotten rid of her then, disgusted to have found her like all the others. By resisting, she had sealed her fate.

A tear flowed on her impeccably powdered cheek, but Radulf could not see it, since he had already left.

•

Pieter reached the top of the stairs, and took a corridor that ought to lead to the servants' quarters. From there, it would not be difficult to find the service entrance and he could at last leave this house.

There were footsteps in front of him; he raised his eyes and found himself face to face with Stefan. For an eternal second, he remained frozen in place; then he fled, running blindly. At the other end of the corridor, he pushed aside a large hanging and saw at the end of a hall the main door of the house. Running for it, he collided violently with a man whose presence he had not even noticed.

Pieter turned to face the man and was struck speechless. The man's clothes were encrusted with gold embroidery and the pommel of his cane was a ruby big as a pigeon's egg. His face empurpled with rage, the man shouted at him: "What kind of manners are these, you boor?"

Stefan interposed himself between Pieter and the man; he held in his hands a heavy velvet cloak.

"Forgive the boy, Highness. He was going to warn your coachman of your sudden departure, and he grew too hurried. He will be punished for his clumsiness. ...Your cloak, Highness?"

Under cover of Stefan's words, Pieter took a few steps back, still facing the son of the Dynast, executing one bow after another. When Radulf, somewhat appeased by Stefan's excuses, turned away, Pieter fled once more. Only half aware of the passages he traversed, he came to a small door leading outside, and finally found himself out on the Sommerstrass. At the top of the street, a sumptuous coach rode toward the Dynasts' Palace. Pieter went slowly in the same direction, staggering through

the squares of light cast from the windows of the houses onto the pavement, like a child splashing through puddles of gold.

The cage

When Pieter knocked at the door of his adoptive father, it took only a few heartbeats before Johann Havel answered. The old man's face showed nothing of the emotions that stirred in him. He simply bade Pieter come in and drew the door shut behind him.

Pieter began to recount what had happened to him; in his voice anger and despair were mixed. Johann led him up the stairs, to the room he had always occupied, since his arrival here at the age of three until his departure a few months before. Pieter sat on his bed and continued his story, telling of his crawl along the gutter, the wasps' nest, Anna and the child's room buried within the basement of the house on the Sommerstrass, his meeting with the son of the Dynast. But he said nothing of what Anna had revealed about his father.

When he was done, he stayed silent a long while. "I don't understand," he said at last. "I thought I would have cried once I got here. But I can't do it; I don't even know if I want to anymore."

Johann Havel, with heavy steps, went to a chest of drawers, pulled a drawer open and took out an object carefully wrapped up in rice paper. "Do you remember?" he asked Pieter, showing him the mechanical elephant nestled within the paper.

"Elfy. My first toy."

Johann turned the key in the mechanism and put down Elfy on top of the chest. The little gray elephant began to walk forward, its trunk swinging rhythmically from side to side.

"I have lived all my life for you," said

the old man in a voice that broke. "All I have invented, all of my endeavors, all that is nothing to me beside the toys I built of my hands for you, beside the games we created together on winter evenings. I would give anything if you could be, for just one more day, the little boy I took in. But I can't make it so. Forgive me."

And Pieter had to hold him up in his arms, for Johann Havel had begun to weep, as old men do when they remember that the pattern of their lives is done and that there is nothing left for them to await.

For three days, Anna's parents screamed the same reproaches, tore their hair, sent fine china plates crashing against the walls as if they had been vulgar tin dishes. Anna observed their hysterics with a detached gaze, as if she watched a ballet. Several times, if only to get five minutes of quiet, she tried to explain to her mother what was about to happen, but her mother would not listen. For three days Anna remained a prisoner of the house on the Sommerstrass, while parental recriminations made the glass panes shake in their lead.

Finally, the letter came. Sealed with the crimson dynastic wax, it surrounded itself with an aura of silence. Anna shook it under her mother's nose, then her father's, and when their mouths had shut at last, Anna broke the seal and read what she had no need to read. Then she opened the finely-worked box that accompanied the letter, and in a rage put on her finger the second seal, the silver ring of her betrothal.

The news spread through Wessendam as a drop of water wets a square of cloth. An incredible number of young women were revealed as longtime friends of

Anna Holtz, eager to visit her in her house on the Sommerstrass; the whole of the aristocracy could no longer conceive of a soirée that did not include Herr and Damme Holtz.

Radulf himself only came to visit Anna a week later. They were left alone. Anna was sitting on the same armchair from which she had welcomed Radulf the first time. Radulf, sitting on the divan Anna's father had occupied, offered her a half-dozen compliments as if choosing them from a previously written list.

"I beg you, Highness," Anna finally said in a toneless voice, "take back the ring. I am not the one you desire. I am incapable of ever loving you."

"That matters not at all to me," answered Radulf.

"But why?" asked Anna, desperate. "Why me?"

At these words Radulf grew pale, rose abruptly and took his leave. Anna, incredulous, had been able to read on his face that he did not know himself.

The next day, Anna learned from her father that harsh controls had been established at the gates of the city: it had become an ordeal to get in or out, and merchants complained bitterly about these unforeseen restrictions to which no reason had been given, only the two words "dynastic orders." She went to her bedroom window and pulled the curtain aside. On the pavement of the Sommerstrass, below her, a man stood staring insolently at her window. His cloak was bordered by a crimson line.

Anna went to see Stefan. "Do you know where Pieter Havel lives?"

"Yes, Damoiselle. At the house of the inventor Johann Havel, on the Ligeiastrass. I have the address."

"I will go there this hour, but you

mustn't accompany me. I have accounts to settle with Pieter Havel, and I believe I do not have much longer to do so."

She went out of her house. The servant of the Dynasts followed her without bothering to be discreet. Anna had hidden her hair under a shawl and wore her dullest garments.

She walked up the Sommerstrass and crossed the Gartenplatz at the top of the hill, then took a transversal street that led to the Ligeiastrass. Once she had reached number 37, she knocked on the door. Radulf's agent observed her as he leaned against the house across the street.

It was Pieter who opened the door.

"May I come in?" asked Anna softly, and Pieter withdrew to let her pass.

"I am happy to see you're healed," said Anna. "I've come to apologize; I troubled you when I should have been letting you recuperate from a shock."

"Damoiselle Holtz," said Johann Havel, who was coming out of a room giving on the entry hall.

"Herr Havel. I am glad to meet you. Pieter will have told you what happened?"

"Indeed. I'm most grateful that you rescued him, Damoiselle. ...And my best wishes of happiness on the occasion of your betrothal."

Anna's smile shattered. "Thank you," she said in a muffled voice.

"You have the eyes of a caged beast, Damoiselle. Must I conclude that you are not totally happy at the thought of this union?" Johann's tone was quietly assured, almost sarcastic.

"Don't mock me, Herr Havel," a livid Anna warned him. Pieter looked at his adoptive father with a scandalized expression.

"You do not wish this marriage, Damoiselle, nothing could be more

clear. You wish to flee, but nothing can take you beyond Radulf's attentions. Am I wrong?"

Anna shook her head, mutely.

"Come with me, Damoiselle. You too, Pieter."

Pieter followed Johann and Anna. A whiff of roses and jasmine came to him; the thought that the Dynast's son could own Anna without her consent dizzied him.

Johann took a large key from his pocket and opened the door to his private workshop, where not even Pieter had ever been allowed. The young man held his breath as he entered this sanctum for the first time. There were too many things scattered on the shelves fixed to the walls for him to distinguish them one from the others. In the center of the room was a vast construct of chains and gears, behind which a trompe-l'œil painting of a cloudy night sky had been set up.

"What is this, Herr Havel?"

"A time machine, Damoiselle. Your way out, if you wish it."

Anna raised her eyebrows, ready to laugh. "You're joking, mein Herr!"

"No, Damoiselle. I have been working on this machine for twenty years, and now it is ready. Use it, and you will vanish within the flow of time. For all of us here, including His Highness Radulf, you will have disappeared forever."

"But how can you be sure that it works?"

"Oh, believe me," said Johann Havel, "it works. And it's at your disposal, Damoiselle."

Anna knew the inventor's words could not be true; yet she believed them. Because nothing mattered anymore, because whatever happened she would find herself wed to a man she would hate more and more every day of the rest

of her life—why not believe, why not be happy for a few days, before everything came apart?

"Let me return to my home, to get what I shall need. I will see you again tonight." And she left.

From autumn to spring

She came back at sunset. Wearing a servant's clothes, carrying a purse filled to bursting with kröners. Johann went to open the door before she knocked.

"I'm ready, Herr Havel," she said. "I have bid my parents goodbye, even though they didn't understand me. There is nothing to hold me back. I have brought what I hope will be enough to pay you. I must warn you I have probably been followed here, even though this time I saw no one."

"I don't fear the son of the Dynast," said Johann Havel. "And I want no payment. Come." He took her to his workshop where Pieter waited, pale and tense.

"Damoiselle Holtz," said Pieter, "you can't leave alone. I'm ready to accompany you."

"Why bother yourself with me?"

Pieter looked her in the eyes, ready to lie, but once again Anna's gaze tore the truth from him.

"Because I want to be with you."

"It's true I shall need a friend over there," said Anna, lowering her gaze.

"Then take your places," said the old inventor. Anna and Pieter sat down side by side on the black leather seat. "Pieter, turn the pedals, as you would for a bicycle. Yes, like that."

The horizontal gear pivoted above their heads and the shining metal comets, suns and stars spun slowly. "Look carefully at the painting!" said the inventor. Docilely, Pieter and Anna gazed at the large canvas.

The illusion came into play: for an instant Pieter thought to see the true sky and clouds; the whirl of the metal ornaments suddenly dizzied him... He let the pedals and the gears grind to a halt. Pieter took his gaze away from the painting. Nothing had changed: his adoptive father still stood there. Anna, seated next to him, was biting at her lower lip. The only strangeness was that he had trouble keeping his concentration, as if he were emerging from sleep or about to enter it.

"Nothing is happening," said Anna. "Herr Havel! Your machine—"

"...is working perfectly, Damselle. Your trip has already begun. Leave the house and fear nothing. Farewell, Pieter, my son."

Anna and Pieter climbed down from the machine. Anna wanted to ask for more explanations from Johann Havel, but at that moment Pieter touched her arm and she staggered, reeling with vertigo.

"It is time to go," said Johann softly. Pieter and Anna opened the front door and took uncertain steps down the Ligeistrass in the light of the setting sun. Johann Havel watched them leave but his eyes were blurry with tears and he did not see them reach the end of the street.

Pieter's vertigo increased at every step. When they had reached the end of the Ligeistrass, where it leads onto the Mittelstrass, he had to stop. Anna held him by the arm and complained: "Pieter, this is insane, this invention did nothing..."

Pieter stepped sideways and felt something cold and wet. He had put his foot into a small patch of snow, in the shadowed corner of a wall.

He spoke to a small boy who watched them curiously. "Will you tell me what day this is?"

"Well, March the sixteenth, Herr-

und-Damme."

Pieter began to laugh. "And the year? What year?" When the bewildered child had answered, he took Anna's hands.

"Eighteen years back, Damselle. I never doubted my father."

"Neither of us has been born, Pieter. I am nothing and no one here." She began to smile. "I am nothing!"

"Damselle—"

"No. Anna. I am a girl like any other, now and forever. Come, evening is falling, we have to find somewhere to lodge for the night." She took him by the hand and together they went, indifferent to those who watched them from the high windows of their houses.

They rented a small room on the third floor of an inn on the Weinenstrass. Anna blew out the candle and lay down next to Pieter in the single bed.

"I'm happy, but frightened at the same time," she said.

"I'm afraid too, Damselle—Anna. I don't know what we will do now." Pieter's voice shook. Anna put her head on his shoulder.

"I'm not ... not so different from Radulf, Anna."

"Never say that. Radulf wanted me like a man wants a statue, or a precious stone: with the knowledge money will be enough to acquire it. You are not Radulf."

"I'm seventeen. I don't understand what I feel, I don't know if it's what I think, or something else..."

"I'm the same age as you, Pieter Havel, and I don't understand what I am feeling either. We will have to learn, that's all." And she kissed him.

May to December

They made their home in a small house on the Fernestrass, at the periphery

of Wessendam. Anna had pilfered a considerable sum from her father's coffers, and this money served them well. Refusing to depend only on Anna's resources, Pieter found work at a neighborhood trader and Anna, for her part, insisted on doing embroidery work at home.

"But you'll ruin your fingers," objected a dismayed Pieter, until she slapped him.

"Hear me well, Pieter Havel. I will nevermore be the *Damoiselle Anna* I used to be. Stop treating me like a prize doll; when you do, you are Radulf. Have the courage to see me as I am, if you want me to share your life!"

She was crying. He took her in his arms. She murmured against his shoulder: "Make me forget, I can't go on anymore, make me forget my house and my father and my mother, make me forget it all..."

Without need to speak of it, they avoided the aristocratic districts of the city. They lived in another Wessendam, a city they might have believed a thousand leagues from the one they had always known.

Once only, they broke that rule. At the Solstice holiday, the whole city went to dance in the dynastic gardens. Anna could not resist going.

They danced a *tarentelle*, and a waltz, and a *Hopfentanz* that made everyone giddy, and suddenly Anna met Radulf's eyes.

He was only a fifteen year old boy, disguised as a petty aristocrat to better mix with the celebrants; but his haughtiness set him apart better than all the rich clothes in the world. Anna's face froze, trying to mask her fright and contempt. After a heartbeat, she turned away and fled, dragging Pieter along.

Radulf knew he had been recognized, and he had been able to read the young woman's emotions on her face. The affront seared him. He tried to make his way to her, but she had vanished in the crowd.

Then he went to his apartments and buried his face in his hands. Humiliation pained him as nothing ever had before. He was the son of the Dynast, and it was for that very reason that this young woman with the heart-stopping face despised him.

Rage now burned in him, and spread its fire to his loins. The Palace's servant girls had compliantly let him rummage under their skirts, but he had never fully proved his virility with a woman. He conceived from this a shame as sudden as it was overwhelming. He put a cloak on his shoulders, took a purse of gold and went to the poor districts.

He signaled to the first whore he saw. His legs trembled; he told himself it was desire. In a narrow, badly-lit room, he made her undress and immediately entered her, spilling his seed after three back-and-forth motions of his sex inside her. Afterwards, she tried to caress him, to give him a chance to recover his ardor, but he pushed her away.

He could not bring himself to ask how much he owed her; he put three gold coins on the small bedside table and retied his breeches. As he opened the door, she whispered, awed by the gold, "Thank you, Highness!" Then he turned to her, terrified: "If you tell—if you say anything of this, I will have you killed!" The girl begged him for mercy, but he was already sprinting down the stairs.

He came back to the Palace, locked himself in his rooms and washed his whole body, overcome with disgust. He curled up in his bed and told himself

again and again that nothing had happened, that he had dreamed, that he would forget it all. He built a wall around his memories of that night, so well so that, many years later, convinced it was from moral purity that he was still chaste at thirty-two, he would never be able to understand why Anna Holtz's face tore through him so painfully, why suddenly he absolutely must possess the young woman, why he could no longer conceive of living without her by his side.

Anna found out in early July that she was pregnant.

"You will give birth to a bastard," Pieter remarked, more than half serious.

"As marriage proposals go, I have heard better."

"...But, after what happened with Radulf, how could you think of..."

"You will never know unless you ask."

He asked. She said yes.

One night in December, Pieter was woken by a strangled cry. He lit the candle and saw Anna holding her belly with both hands, her face twisted in pain.

"Pieter, please, take me to the Geburtshaus right now. I hurt so bad; something's wrong."

Pieter went down into the street, fetched the neighbors and with their help took Anna to the birthing house.

She began to scream, eyes wide open, looking at nothing. She was made to lie down on an elevated bed, in a secluded room. Pieter held her hand while the doctor helped her push out the dead and bloody piece of flesh her womb had sheltered. He held her hand until she stopped screaming, and long afterwards, until the doctor made him let

go.

He walked with Pieter through the corridors of the Geburtshaus. "She had lost too much blood," he said tiredly.

"I don't blame you for anything," said Pieter. He tore away from the doctor's grip and ran out of the Geburtshaus. Something was rising in his throat and he feared the scream would be nothing more than a terrible burst of laughter.

He strode the streets of Wessendam, unaware of their names. He went downhill, then up, a dozen times. The winter snow made its way into his shoes and froze his feet, but he felt nothing.

Finally, he found himself facing the Schwarze Kanal, whose black water reflected the stars. He leaned above the stone parapet, and saw himself indistinctly in the watery mirror, a shape darker than the night sky, visible more by the stars it occulted than by itself.

On the other side of the canal, he could see the alley separating the houses on the Herbststrass from those on the Sommerstrass. This alley he hadn't dared descend, fearing the waters of the canal where now he planned to drown himself. This alley he had ascended less than a year ago and that he would ascend, seventeen years in the future, to reach the house where Anna Holtz lived, this house where Anna would be born in a few weeks.

Anna and Stefan

The morning of December fifteenth, a young man who called himself Stefan called at the Holtz house, on the Sommerstrass, and was hired as a domestic. Courteous, efficient, he was soon noticed by his employers and rapidly climbed in the servants' hierarchy.

Damme Holtz gave birth in January to a baby girl, who was given the name of Anna. Stefan saw her grow up, at first

from afar. But when she became old enough to move about the house alone, he became her favorite domestic, out-ranking even her governess in her affections.

Anna was a willful child, spoiled by her parents. When she turned ten, her father, at her request, had a small room built for her only use, in the basement of the house, which was full of a clutter that delighted the child. Stefan found there a faceted pink quartz bowl Anna used as a candleholder.

There were five idyllic years, during which Anna became a young woman. Stefan remained a privileged confidant. She admitted to him, the day she turned fifteen: "My parents are beginning to want to marry me off. But I don't want an arranged marriage. I want to choose myself the man with whom I will live the rest of my days, but they won't understand!"

"If you want to choose him yourself, *Damoiselle*," said Stefan, his throat tight, "no one will be able to prevent you."

During the next two years, Anna had to refuse, politely but without appeal, one good match after another, every three or four months. Her parents at first blamed themselves: they had been too hasty: was she still not a child? Many young women only found a husband when they were eighteen or nineteen.

But after her seventeenth birthday, they began to worry. They regretted never having bent her to their will before; she had never learned obedience.

And then, on a night at the beginning of autumn, they received the visit of a dynastic servant: the son of the Dynast, his Highness Radulf, had glimpsed young Anna during a stroll along the canals, and desired to meet her. Anna was directly informed of the visit, and, horrified, went to confide in Stefan.

The man who had spent seventeen years living only for her felt the hand of Chronos close upon him. He asked, "But isn't this wonderful news?" in a tone meant to provoke Anna even further. She fled to her room.

The next day, Pieter Havel was beaten and thrown out of the Achinger house, on the *Herbstestrass*. He crawled painfully along the gutter in the middle of the alley that ran at the back of the houses, until he disturbed a wasps' nest. He owed his life to the intervention of Anna, who opened the basement's window for him. Stefan, who was watching from the attic window, saw him vanish inside the house.

He waited for Anna to come find him and tell him what had happened, and to swear him to silence. Then he went down to see Pieter. For a long while he watched the young man he had been seventeen years before, then he roused himself, undressed Pieter and bandaged his wounds. When he was done, he covered the boy up as best he could, heaved a deep sigh, and blew out the candle stub.

With early morning he returned bringing a tray of food, but Pieter still slept. Stefan left, and waited in his quarters for Anna to come to him. Morning was well advanced when she came, asking him to accompany her. They went down to the basement and Stefan was barely in time to catch a collapsing Pieter in his arms. He took him back to the little room and put him back to bed.

Anna began to speak with Pieter. Stefan remembered this conversation and the burning wish he had had, to be left alone with a young woman with whom it seemed to him he had already fallen in love; so he left the room and shut the door.

He felt destiny's grip squeezing him

almost hard enough to crush him.

Night fell; in the parlor, Anna and her parents awaited the Dynast's son. The clock struck eight. Finally, His Highness' carriage stopped in front of the house on the Sommerstrass. Stefan steeled himself to patience. He had never known what time it was when he met with Radulf. He resolved to listen at the parlor's door; he heard Radulf invite Anna to the ball, heard Anna decline and explain her refusal. Then he ran to the basement stairs, afraid he would be too late.

Pieter saw him and spent an eternal second beholding him in silence, before taking flight along the great hall. Stefan followed him and took up Radulf's cloak as Pieter ran into the son of the Dynast. Stefan interposed himself between the two and unleashed a flood of apologies, giving Pieter enough time to flee.

Anna's parents, horrified, had witnessed the scene from the rear of the hall. "Who was this young idiot?" asked Herr Holtz, in a voice that he wanted to shake with anger. Stefan, for an instant, thought to answer him with the exact truth; but he contained himself. "A young apprentice we had just hired on a trial basis, sir. There will be no need to dismiss him, I am sure we will never see him again."

Three days later came the letter from the son of the Dynast, asking Anna Holtz's hand in marriage. Stefan saw the young woman drowning in despair; he tried to console her somewhat, but he could not tell her the truth. After Radulf's second visit, Anna came to him: "Do you know where Pieter Havel lives?"

"Yes, Damoiselle. At the house of the inventor Johann Havel, on the Ligeiastrass. I have the address."

At teatime that afternoon, Anna paid no

attention to what was being said. Her parents did not notice, too busy congratulating her on her imminent wedding.

Suddenly Anna spoke to her mother. "You always wanted what was best for me, didn't you, Mama?"

"But of course."

"And you, Papa, do you regret indulging my whims?"

Her father considered her a moment. "You know I don't, Anna. We are happy for you because we want your happiness, as always."

"Thank you," she said, and wiped her eyes and abruptly left the table.

Stefan saw her for the last time as, disguised as a common woman, she descended the stairs that led to the service entrance. When the sky had darkened over the roofs of the high houses, he knew that Anna and Pieter had vanished in the flow of time.

Gone

Anna's absence was discovered the next morning. The servants were questioned harshly. It was rapidly established that the young woman had fled the previous evening, but no one could ascertain her destination. Herr and Damme Holtz ordered one and all to keep absolute silence on the subject, while they set a search in motion.

Toward early afternoon, a man wearing a cape bordered in dynastic crimson came to ask some questions of Anna's parents, who could not bring themselves to lie to him.

Radulf himself came in the evening. His gaze was that of a man who has just killed. "There is nowhere she can flee," he said with desperate rage. "The city's exits are sealed, and my men are patrolling the surrounding lands. I will find her."

Stefan went to number 37 of the Ligeiastrass the next day. He had left behind a letter of resignation. He bore at his side a purse containing all that was left of Anna's treasure, along with his savings on seventeen years' wages.

The door had been smashed in; inside was total chaos. Dozens of heterogeneous objects lay scattered across the floor. Horrified, Stefan called for Johann, who came out of his workshop wiping his hands dry on a rag.

"Hello, Pieter," he said in a faint voice. "As you can see, the Dynast's men came to visit yesterday. They weren't very happy when they failed to find Anna, but I believe I have convinced them she was nowhere about. No, I'm not hurt: they shook me about, but nothing else. Come."

He led Stefan into his private workshop, where the time machine still stood proudly, minus its painting. "They tore off some of the ornaments and hit the gears with a hammer, so I had to spend the morning putting everything to rights. Fortunately, it's a rather sturdy piece of work." He went to a corner of the room and took up a roll of canvas. "Help me put the painting back in place, will you? That part, I figured I had best put away in safety."

Stefan helped the inventor put the canvas back in place. "There we are; just like new," said Johann Havel in a sarcastic tone. "Don't you want to try it?"

Stefan looked him in the eye. He had understood at last, and the knowledge was bitter. "Do I even have a choice?"

"I don't know. Believe me, I don't know."

"I just want to see her once again," said Stefan. "Once more, that's all. So I can remember how happy we were, she and I."

"Then take your place. This machine

was built for no one but you."

Stefan sat down on the black leather seat and spun the pedals. The mechanism creaked shrilly and began to move. The stars, suns and comets tied to the periphery of the great horizontal gear passed in front of his eyes again and again, evoking the illusion that the clouds moved in the night sky.

A terrible vertigo seized him. He fell from the machine, to be caught by Johann. The whole room seemed to sway, its walls insubstantial.

"Go now," said the inventor. "Go and regret nothing."

Stefan clumsily opened the workshop's door, went out of the house on the Ligeiastrass. His feet came down in the freshly-fallen snow of a winter evening.

He began to walk toward the Fernestrass, where he had once lived with Anna. His vertigo had faded but was not yet gone. He began to shiver; the cold reached through his too-thin clothes.

In front of him, a young woman walked through the snow; she was wrapped up in a worn coat from beneath which her legs emerged, clad in extravagant silk stockings. Her feet were swallowed up by enormous men's galoshes. As he passed her, Stefan saw she was at the term of her pregnancy. He hesitated and she, seeing that he watched her, gave him the smile of an inexperienced professional.

"Pardon, mein Herr," she said in a voice she tried to make seductive. "Could you help me get to the Geburtshaus? I feel the baby coming fast. My man's sick, he had to stay home."

Stefan took her arm mutely, bearing up a good part of her weight. She began to walk faster. "Remind me, meine Damme," he asked, "what day is this?"

"December fourteenth," she said, and Stefan bit his lip till blood flowed.

When they came in, the nurse judged at a glance both the young woman's state and her social standing. She asked Stefan in a sour tone: "Are you the father?"

"Me? No, certainly not," said Stefan, and an instant later three men rushed in, carrying Anna Holtz in their arms. He saw Pieter Havel looking at him, without seeing what should have been obvious, so absorbed was he by Anna. Stefan watched her being carried away on a stretcher, her beautiful face twisted in pain, Pieter holding her hand.

He had had his wish. Now the time had come to accomplish the most painful part.

The hand of Chronos

Number 37 of the Ligeiastrass was vacant. On the morning of December fifteenth, Stefan went to see the owner and showed him a purse full of gold: all the money Anna Holtz had taken with her into the past. "I would buy the house from you. Is this enough?"

"Ah—but certainly, Herr...?"

"Havel... Johann Havel."

He moved in that evening. He had a plaque put on the door: "Johann Havel / Inventor." It would not be a lie very long.

He would have to learn the principles of gears and levers, the composition of ceramics and the secrets of metals. He knew it would take him nearly twenty years to rebuild the time machine according to his memories, and that meanwhile a thousand and one other things would get built. He did his apprenticeship building a small mechanical elephant, which walked swinging its trunk from side to side.

It took him three years to achieve it, and when at last he held the toy in his

hands, he went to the Krug orphanage.

In the long low room where the youngest children played, he bent down to a small boy and smiled. "What's your name?"

"Pieter." The boy's voice betrayed a small measure of fright, and Johann remembered how intimidated he had been by the old man.

"Would you like to come live with me, Pieter? I would be your Papa."

The boy hesitated, then nodded, and Johann went to sign the official papers. "One question only, meine Damme. The child's parents..."

"Our principle is not to reveal this information," answered the governess. Seeing Johann's supplicating expression, she relented: "Let us say that his mother's profession did not allow her to take care of him."

On the way, Johann first held the boy's hand. When they had reached the bottom of the street, he squatted down and took a package out of his pocket. "Look what I have for you," he said. He took the elephant from its nest of paper, turned the key in the mechanism and set it down. On the sunlight-gilded flagstones, the little elephant walked forward, swinging its trunk. Pieter showed a radiant smile.

"What do you want to call him?" asked the inventor, because he remembered he had to ask the question now.

"Elfy," said the little boy, without hesitation.

"Then take Elfy with you, and hold tight to him. I'll carry you to my house."

He put Pieter on his shoulders and walked up the streets that would lead him to the Ligeiastrass.

He would see Pieter grow up for twelve years, which would pass both too fast and too slowly. With the passage of

time, he would build him a whole menagerie of toys, would invent for him a crowd of games. He could not doubt it, for he remembered it all.

In a room of the house on the Ligeiastrass, Johann set up his private workshop, where no one, not even Pieter, had the right to enter. There he began his long labor.

He tried at first to make the ornaments himself, but he failed and had to resort to articles imported from a great city without Neuerland. He ordered a trompe-l'œil canvas showing a cloudy night sky from a dozen artists, until he finally obtained the right one. He had to make himself the molds to cast his gears, to try hundreds of combinations of pulleys and chains, before reaching something satisfying. Through a thousand false leads and dead ends, he rebuilt the time machine. He did not invent it: he merely remembered it.

When Pieter reached the age of sixteen, he left school and looked for work. He finally found a post as a servant in the Achinger household, on the Herbeststrass. "It's only for a while," he said to Johann. "But I'll save up some money and it will give me good references." He left the house in which he had spent nearly fifteen years, promising to come visit Johann every Sunday.

Time passed inexorably. In his house on the Ligeiastrass, the old inventor Johann Havel busied himself about his time machine.

One evening in late fall, almost six months after Pieter had found his job, Johann tied the last silk thread, tightened the last screw, and he knew that the machine was finished. He sat down on the black leather seat, spun the pedals a few times. Above his head, the great horizontal gear pivoted on its axis, mimicking the celestial sphere, and the stars,

the comets and the moons of shining metal hung to the rim of the gear began to spin. Johann Havel let the movement of the cogs stop by itself, then climbed down from the seat. He felt in the grip of a slight vertigo, as if he had just come out of sleep or was falling into it. The walls of his house seemed to become insubstantial. He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead on the cool glass of the window a moment, then he went to sit heavily in a faded velvet armchair. Morning sunlight surprised him; he had no awareness of having slept.

The last days seemed unbearably rapid. Pieter came back to his house, still shaken and bruised. It seemed to Johann Havel that it was only an instant later that Anna knocked at the door. He recited the words he had never forgotten. Once she had left, promising to return, Pieter asked: "You will let her leave... alone?"

"Perhaps," said Johann Havel—and he hated himself in that instant, but he could not fight against his memories—"perhaps you should accompany her."

"If she wants me along," said Pieter sadly.

"Believe me, she will," said Johann Havel.

Anna returned just before sunset. Pieter offered to accompany her and the young woman did not refuse. She sat down next to him on the black leather seat and Pieter spun the pedals.

"Nothing is happening," said Anna. "Herr Havel! Your machine—"

"...is working perfectly, *Damoiselle*. Your voyage has already started. Leave the house and fear nothing. Farewell, Pieter, my son."

Johann led them to the door. He followed them with his gaze as they went

down the Ligeiastrass, with uncertain steps, in the light from the setting sun. His eyes were blurry with tears and he did not see them reach the end of the street.

He went back in, sat down heavily. The hand of Chronos seemed to have loosened its grip, but he was a prisoner of it still.

The Dynast's men came to see him the next day. They shook him roughly, shouted accusations and smashed objects chosen at random, but Johann did not lose his nerve. He pretended to be afraid and said again and again that Damoiselle Holtz had come to ask him if he could build her a large clockwork animal, nothing more, and that he had not seen her since. In the end, they believed him. When the servants of the Dynast had gone, he took up his tools and repaired the insignificant damage they had inflicted on the time machine, leaving everything else aside.

He waited for Stefan's visit, and the next day watched him sit down on the black leather seat. "Go," he said, "and regret nothing." He buried his face in his hands so that he would not see him get out of the house, on his way to the past.

He felt as if a blade had been pulled out of his belly: a relief mixed with the fear of what would happen, now that the wound was exposed. And yet, he could feel it, the hand of Chronos had still not completely relinquished its grasp.

The last voyage

No one believed the Dynast's son when he declared that he would die if he did not find Anna Holtz. Young men, even at thirty-two, are liable to childish pronouncements future circumstances will force them to recant.

But Anna was never found. In the

end, her parents assumed that she lay somewhere at the bottom of one of the city's canals, although they kept the secret hope she had managed to leave Wessendam and now lived, anonymous, somewhere in Neuerland. As for Johann Havel, he went a few times to visit the grave in the paupers' cemetery where lay Anna Havel, dead in childbirth, accompanied into eternity by a child left forever nameless.

Eight years after Anna Holtz's disappearance, Radulf acceded to the throne. A mediocre, irascible and ill-loved ruler, his persistent refusal to marry and perpetuate the Dynasty induced anxiety among his advisors; an anxiety that turned to panic the day he was diagnosed with an almost always fatal disease.

Despite their efforts, they could not prevent the news from spreading throughout Wessendam. Eventually it came to the Ligeiastrass and to the ears of an old inventor, who went upon the hour to the Palace of the Dynasts. On his calling card, he wrote *I can show you Anna Holtz*, and this magical formula gave him access to the very room where the Dynast Radulf awaited death.

His face ashen, hastily dressed, not yet shod, the Dynast sat in a large armchair. "If this is a jest, I will have you killed," he said.

"I can show you Anna Holtz, Majesty; it is the pure and simple truth. Follow me home, but I must insist that we go alone."

Without a word, the Dynast slipped on his shoes, shouldered a cloak whose hood he pulled down over his face, and motioned for Johann Havel to follow. They took a long narrow corridor, went down two flights of stairs, and found themselves in the Palace gardens. Johann took the lead and brought the

Dynast to number 37 of the Ligeiastrass.

In his private workshop stood the time machine, freshly dusted. "This is the machine that Anna Holtz used eight years ago to regress into her own past, so as to flee beyond your reach. I see that you refuse to believe me, Majesty. But I only ask for a minute of your time—afterwards, you can judge me mad if you will. Sit down on the seat next to me." Johann turned the pedals. The horizontal gear creaked and began to revolve; the metal moons, suns and stars passed more and more swiftly against the night sky. Radulf protested: "What is this—" but cried out suddenly when Johann grasped his arm. Could it be his illness already smiting him? A terrible vertigo had gripped his senses, and it was as if the room's walls had become insubstantial. Johann forced him to climb down from the seat and led him elsewhere—it seemed to Radulf they were passing straight through a wall. His head spun; he could understand nothing.

They stood against a high window. The lamps behind them cast squares of gold onto the street's pavement.

"Look well, Majesty, look closely, there she is!"

And Radulf saw Anna Holtz walking, almost running, along the street, holding by the hand a young man whom he did not recognize. He cried out again, this time almost with joy.

"She is here! I have found her! I will give you whatever you ask; but we must catch up to her, now..."

"No. We are twenty-five years back, Majesty. Your place is not here. You will never see her again; she will never be yours, because she never was."

Radulf pried himself free from Johann's grasp. "I care nothing for your desires and theories, Herr Havel. I will fetch her, and you are powerless to

prevent me."

"You will come back to your own time. You have no choice."

"How so? Your time machine did not follow us here, did it?"

"What time machine? That assemblage of gears and pulleys, of gewgaws and canvas? That is not a time machine. It has taken me all my life to learn that time machines do not exist. There is nothing in the world save love, and will, and death. Now come." And he took the Dynast's arm again, and, ignoring his desperate imprecations, he took him back through the corridors of time.

The end

Radulf called his advisors and agents to him. As he was about to order Johann Havel's assassination, he fell silent, hung his head. "To what purpose..." he whispered. Then, in a voice barely stronger: "I wish to dictate my last will and testament."

He died a few months later, without acknowledged descendants. The throne of Neuerland remained empty. A shiver of worry went through the houses in the rich districts of Wessendam. The poor, however, felt little sadness or fear. In fact, many of them refused to publicly mourn their last sovereign. The new authorities of Neuerland refused to let that gesture go unpunished, but their repression aroused the people's anger, and in the subsequent riots dynastic rule was overthrown.

Johann Havel paid these events little attention. For the hand of Chronos had at last released him, and he felt only immense relief, and immense weariness. He took down the sign from his door, for in the final accounting he had never invented anything, save for his own existence.

He saw two or three more summers,

and one day he was found dead in his workshop, seated in an old armchair next to a vast and incomprehensible machine, clutching to his breast a small mechanical elephant.

The flow of time breaks on the houses of Wessendam without altering their appearance. The high brick walls, decorated with baked porcelain, cross the centuries without seeing their colors fade. The thick and rippled glass of the narrow windows, through which the world appears as if submerged in abnormally transparent water; flows only imperceptibly in its lead. When evening comes, the yellow light of lamps casts squares of gold onto the pavement of the sloping streets, as it has always been.

At the heart of the Palace of the

Dynasts, which has become the House of the People—for no one can halt the course of History—in a room where relics of bygone times have been stored, stands Johann Havel's time machine. Its gears and chains have long since been overcome by rust, and the marvelous machine is frozen into absolute immobility.

And yet the time machine is still functioning. For, from within its forgotten room where dust softly gathers, carrying along with it the House of the People, the city of Wessendam and the whole of Neuerland, it progresses slowly, at the rate of one second per second, toward a future of which no more is written. •

for Nathalie

YVES MEYNARD has been publishing stories since 1986. The French version of "Johann Havel's Marvelous Machine" was among the three stories that netted him the Grand Prix de la Science Fiction et du Fantastique Québécois in 1994.

ILLUSTRATOR: KENNETH SCOTT has recently won L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of the Future contest and will appearing in volume XII of *Writers of the Future*, due out in May. He is currently catching up on a lot of boredom.

The Day I Ate Jupiter

Sandra Kasturi

The hot singing beauty of the planets eats me alive
as I see them whirl through the night reaches of space.

I pluck one
a ripe coal
placed under the tongue
with burnt fingers
the planet's juices
running down my chin
its brilliant gases dissolving
in my mouth sifting
through my skin
its mouth-watering center
savored layer by layer
though time rots my body
and withers my voice
until only the bright kernel
of Jupiter's everlasting gobstopper core
remains smouldering in my throat
making me shine
and shine
and shine •

SANDRA KASTURI's poetry has appeared in *Contemporary Verse 2*, *TransVersions*, and several issues of *ON SPEC*. She is currently editing an anthology of speculative poetry entitled *The Stars As Seen From This Particular Angle of Night*. She is also working on a screenplay, her own collection of verse, a series of modernized Estonian folktales, but not a novel.



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The Last Lesson

Tanya Huff

illustrated by James Beveridge

The lizard peered out from under its layer of dust and seemed to sneer at the girl languidly flicking a cloth around the cluttered room. Safely tucked on a top shelf, it rested far beyond the reach of such a careless cleaning. Although its topaz eyes were dull under years of accumulated grime, and sawdust seeped from a tear in an uplifted front leg, the lizard gave the very definite impression it would rather continue to slowly deteriorate than risk destruction under the grimy rag now being waved about. Almost it flinched as a rodent skull, as ancient as itself, was caught up and dashed to the floor.

"Oh, lizard piss," muttered the girl looking down at the scattered ivory shards. She pushed heavy chestnut hair back off her face and kicked a yellowed tooth beneath the edge of a bulging cabinet. "I don't even know why I bother.

"It's no wonder a wizard's apprenticeship is so long," she continued, glaring about the room—the edges of several loose papers curled, and a tarnished silver goblet acquired a tracery of frost—"a good half of it's spent cleaning up after other people." Then her eyes lit on the massive spell book lying closed and locked on its lectern, and she smiled.

She stuffed the cleaning rag between a badly dented brass horn and the jawbone of an ass and sped across the workroom. At the lectern, she ran her fingers lightly over gilded runes, murmured the standard unlocking spell, and watched the worn leather cover of the spell book roll back.

"He doesn't really expect me to get this place clean," she told the prodding of her conscience. "He only wants me to stay busy while he's gone." That the massive book and its ancient contents had been expressly forbidden her, she chose to ignore. Had her master truly wished her not to read the book, surely he'd have used a stronger lock spell. The one on it was absurdly easy to break.

"Besides," she added, tossing her hair back over her shoulders, "he could be clos-

eted with the king for hours. I'm sure he'd want me to study." She flipped the thick parchment pages with little respect for their age and quickly scanned the titles as they passed. A spell for bringing in water? Not likely, bringing in the water ranked amongst the high points of her day. A spell to look as beautiful as the morning? Mornings were made to be slept through. A spell to move carpets through the air? She'd tried that the last time, and as far as she knew, her little rug still rose through the heavens.

Good thing she'd jumped off as it headed for the window. A spell to bring warmth on the coldest of days? Now that was more like it.

Glancing up through the workroom's frost-edged window, she shivered at the bleak view of winter grey sky. At least here in the palace, the windows were glassed. She bent her head to read.

"MAGDELENE!"

When she could breathe again, when her heart had stopped pounding so loudly in her ears, Magdelene slowly turned around.

Adar, the king's wizard, her master, stood just inside the doorway, the color of his face almost matching the deep purple of his robes. "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?"

Magdelene dove for her duster and grabbed it just as Adar, moving faster than a man of his apparent age should've been able, got her by the ear. She twisted in his grip and waved the filthy bit of cloth under his nose.

"I've been, ouch, cleaning."

"You've been into the spell book again!"

Well if you knew, why did you ask? Magdelene wondered, but wisely kept the thought to herself. "I didn't do any. I was only reading."

"I thought I told you to stay away from it!" He punctuated each word with a tug

on her ear. "I'll say when you're ready." He thrust her away and shook his head. "I should beat you."

Magdelene rubbed her throbbing ear and backed up. "We have a deal," she reminded him.

The wizard's eyebrows rose almost to the edge of his hat. "I know we have a deal," he snarled. "You remind me of it every time I catch you doing something I've told you not to." His arms flew wide for dramatic emphasis. "You get beaten less than any wizard's apprentice in the history of the art."

"How would you know about other apprentices?" Magdelene asked before she considered the consequences. "You've been in hiding for years." She yelped as a heavy hand cuffed her soundly and a well-placed foot sent her sprawling toward the door.

"Go!" roared her master. "Get out of my sight before I forget myself!"

"Where should I go?"

"I don't care."

"I could go get water."

"You do that."

As his apprentice caught up her jacket and fled the room, slamming the door behind her, Adar rubbed his face with both hands and attempted to calm down. Teaching a dragon manners would be easier than living with that obnoxious brat. He walked slowly over to the spell book and looked down at the open page. Reading it was she? The words crawled about the parchment in joyous abandon, one in five in a recognizable language. In the six years he'd had the ancient book, he'd deciphered two spells. The lock spell she'd so blithely demolished had been stronger than the one on the king's treasury.

He sighed, plucked a large grey and white cat off his chair, and collapsed into it.

"I don't know why you're looking so

depressed," he muttered at the cat, who snorted and walked away. "Your apprentice doesn't walk through your most powerful spells like they aren't there." He snatched off his sagging felt hat, and a surprising amount of scraggly grey hair came with it. Gradually, wrinkles and lines smoothed out and the wizard's true face emerged. Although the king thought his wizard an elderly sage, Adar was barely ten years older than his apprentice.

He swung his feet up on the scarred oak table that dominated the room, and let his head fall back. "Why?" he asked a spider mending her web by the ceiling, "do I bother?"

"You bother," growled a small, harsh voice, "to keep your miserable life."

Adar turned his head just enough to see the glass vial that held his greatest achievement. The tiny demon within glared out at him and flicked impossibly small claws.

"You bother," the demon continued, "because you know full well she'll tell if you don't. The king and your cushy job'd be no protection if your master's old friends find you."

"It was an accident."

"Oh sure, that's why you burned the body, grabbed his spell book, and ran."

"And who asked you, H'sak?" Adar purred, black eyes glinting dangerously. "Remember who put you there."

H'sak shrugged scaled shoulders and leaned against the wall of his prison. "Oh, you've got power, I'll give you that, but it was a lucky shot that put me here and you know it. You'll never do it again."

"I'll never have to."

"Now your apprentice...if you want to talk about power..."

"I don't." The wizard scooped up Magdelene's discarded cleaning rag and tossed it over the vial. "And I've plans for

taking care of her as well. Her and her power."

From under the rag came muffled but malicious laughter. "Better hurry."

Hurry? Adar rose, stretched, and preened a little in front of the large oval mirror leaning upright against a stack of moldering books. Why hurry? He glanced over at Magdelene's bed tucked into a corner of the workroom. The brat couldn't be more than...he thought back. She'd been ten when she'd nearly exposed him before the king and all the court at the last Seven Year Festival and that was only...Netherhells! Over four years ago? It couldn't have been. He counted back on his fingers.

Six years ago he'd slain his master to get at the forbidden spell book, a book the old fool was incapable of even opening.

Five years ago he'd used the book to trap the demon and then used the demon to impress the king and become court wizard. A position that not only netted him rooms in the palace with his every material need instantly seen to but was the first step on his road to world domination. He paused and preened again; world domination, how he loved the sound of that.

Four years ago a grimy girl-child had almost snatched paradise away by seeing through his elaborately magicked disguise. A disguise which, until then, had held up against the combined powers of his ex-master's searching friends. He'd struck a bargain with the brat—who fortunately had no idea of her incredible potential—training for her silence. He knew, in time, he'd remove the threat. Knew, in time, he'd use the second spell gleaned from the stolen book.

Over four years...why that would make her...

"Show me Magdelene!" he com-

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manded, and the mirror, like the well-trained wizard's tool it was, cleared to show his apprentice sitting on the well's edge gazing up through her lashes at a brawny guardsman. The demon was right. He'd better hurry.

Precariously perched on the ice-covered stones of the well, Magdelene considered how much she hated being cold. She hated the woolens she was forced to wear in the winter, she hated the way her hands ached, and she hated the way her nose ran. Given a choice she'd make her home where the only cold came in frosted mugs, and she'd every intention of finishing that spell to bring warmth on the coldest of days. In the meantime, however, she explored a possible alternative source of heat.

"There you go, Magdelene." The young guardsman secured the well handle and reached out to swing in the full bucket. "This'll fill your other pail, and you'll be set."

"Thank you." Magdelene peered up through her lashes and wondered when Pagrick was going to do something besides draw water. She hoped he didn't expect her to make the first move; she hadn't the vaguest idea of how to begin. And a girl could only take so much flexing and sweating and sighing.

Pagrick flexed mighty shoulders, the ripple visible even through his winter furs, wiped the sheen of sweat from a tanned brow, met Magdelene's eyes, and sighed. Magdelene gritted her teeth. Several large icicles broke free from the south tower and crashed to the ground.

Ever vigilant, Pagrick spun about at the noise. His sword, hanging sheathed at his side, caught between Magdelene's legs and tipped her neatly into the well.

Although chunks of ice floated on the surface, the water began to steam when she hit it. For quite possibly the first time

in recorded history, the white heat of rage meant exactly that.

Spraying water with every move, Magdelene slammed open the door to the workshop and stamped through the barricade spells. If she hated being cold, there were no words to describe how she felt about being cold and wet. She slammed the door shut again just to hear the noise.

Adar, perched on the edge of the table, was thankful he'd had enough time to recover from his bout of near hysterical laughter and arrange his expression into one more properly sympathetic. Beside him lay his own fleece lined robe. The scene at the well had decided him. He would use the second spell this afternoon, and in a few short hours he'd not only be rid of his apprentice but would have more than enough power to face his master's old friends and anyone else who dared interfere with his plans.

"The great, stupid, clumsy..." She sniffed and flung her sodden jacket to the floor. "Oh, how I hate him!"

"Enough," Adar said firmly. "Get out of those wet clothes before you catch a chill." He forced a note of gentle concern into his voice.

Magdelene fumbled with her tunic laces, but her fingers were too stiff to untie the wet leather. She started to shake and found, to her surprise, she couldn't stop. She sniffed again, and a tear joined the ice water still dribbling down her face from her hair. She realized the path of the tear was the only warm spot on her body, and as it felt so pleasant, she began to cry in earnest.

The wizard sighed, impatient to begin now he'd made his decision. Finally, he threw the robe over his shoulder, stepped forward and, with his dagger, split Magdelene's tunic from collar to hem. Holding the wet wool distastefully in two

fingers, he slipped it back and off, to join the jacket on the floor.

Magdelene continued to sob, turning, lifting, and moving obediently as the wizard undressed her. The next thing she knew, she was wrapped in his robe and sitting on her bed, her hands clutching a mug of warm milk. She sniffed once or twice more and stopped crying. There seemed to be nothing remaining to cry about.

That was certainly interesting, she thought, drinking the milk and remembering the touch of warm fingers on breast and hip. I wonder what happens next. Surprisingly enough, Adar was thinking pretty much the same thing. He knew what he had to do before he could work the spell, the ancient book had been very specific, but under the layers of wool and leather and cotton, his apprentice was not the grubby child he remembered. Four years, he was forced to conclude, made one netherhell of a difference. He wondered how he'd missed it happening.

For her part, Magdelene had discovered that her teacher was actually quite attractive in a, well, wizardly sort of way. He was no Pagrick, with mighty thews and sun-bronzed curls, and she doubted he could croon a ballad to save his life, but his black hair lay sleek and shining against his head and his black eyes had an intensity that sent new chills up and down her back. Even his silly ambitions—why anyone would want the bother of dominating the world, Magdelene had no idea—took on a slightly majestic hue. When he sat on the bed beside her, she realized, with a sudden stab of excitement, she was finally going to discover what came after the flexing and sweating and sighing. She quickly drank the last of the milk just in case the next step would require both hands free. Unfortunately, she choked and a great

deal of warm liquid came back up through her nose.

During the back pounding that followed, things got a bit tangled up. The empty mug fell to the floor, but neither Adar nor Magdelene noticed. The robe soon followed.

H'sak, watching from his prison, almost felt some sympathy for Adar as the wizard struggled valiantly to match the enthusiasm of his apprentice. Almost.

When Adar awoke the next morning, it took him a moment to remember where he was. Hardly surprising; once or twice throughout the night he'd forgotten who he was. Where were his red velvet bed curtains? What on earth had happened to make his feather mattress so hard and cramped and ... Magdelene...

He slid out of bed, not a difficult maneuver as he was barely balanced on the edge of the cot, and looked down at his sleeping apprentice. Slowly he smiled. More slowly still, because he wasn't entirely certain his back was up to it, he straightened to his full height. The prerequisite of the second spell had been met, and as prerequisites went, Adar mused, it beat the netherhells out of sacrificing goats. He began to chant.

"What are you doing?" Magdelene asked sleepily, rising up on one elbow. "You're making an awful lot of noise."

"Noise? Ha!" His eyes widened, and red and gold sparks, the visible manifestation of his power, danced along his outstretched arms. He couldn't resist gloating. "With this spell I take your power just as I took your virginity!"

"Took?" She pushed her hair out of her eyes and yawned. "Who took? I gave it to you."

"Ha!" Adar repeated and spoke the last three words of the spell. In spite of, or perhaps because of, his exertions of the night before, he felt terrific. And once

he added Magdelene's power to his own...

Always fascinated by new magic, Magdelene watched with interest as sparks of green and blue began lifting from her and flying to join their red and gold brethren on Adar's arms. Faster and thicker they flew until Adar was near buried in them and beginning to look worried. Then they merged and became a stream of green and blue fire.

The last Magdelene saw of Adar, he was definitely not happy as he disappeared within the flames. For an instant longer, a roaring column of power danced in the center of the room, the occasional red or gold spark looking lost and alone in the green and the blue, then, almost too fast to follow, it flowed into the only receptacle in the room capable of containing it. It returned to the girl on the bed.

All that remained of Adar was a pile of soft grey ash.

Never at her best first thing in the morning, Magdelene studied the ash for a moment. "Oops," she said at last. Common sense told her this was not what Adar had intended. Before she could ask what next, the sound of breaking glass made the question unnecessary.

One inch, two, a foot, three, seven... H'sak stretched and his claws scored the ceiling. "FREE!" he roared. "FREE!"

Magdelene looked up, way up, and tried a tentative smile. It wasn't returned. "Oh, help," she sighed and dove off the cot just as eight-inch talons reduced it to kindling.

"Couldn't we talk about this?" she protested, scrambling under the table.

"Talk?" bellowed the demon. He grabbed the table's edge. "All I've done for five years is talk! I wanna kill something!" Muscles bulged under scaled skin, and the massive table flipped up against the wall.

At the last possible instant, Magdelene dove between his legs. "Your death," H'sak bellowed, whirling about, "will restore my standing in the Netherworld!"

"Mine?" Magdelene squealed, and ducked. "Why mine?"

"You saw—" H'sak stopped suddenly and leaned against the wall to get his breath back while his quarry watched him warily. Apparently five years imprisonment had left him a little out of shape. "You saw," the demon began again, "what your power did to Adar?"

"Yeah." She slid one foot toward the door but stilled when H'sak tensed. "The spell failed."

H'sak roared with laughter. "Failed? It succeeded only too well. He took your power, but the posturing braggart was unable to contain it. The sheer amount of it destroyed him."

"But I got it back."

"You did," the demon agreed. "And his as well. Not," he added, "that you needed it."

"I have Adar's power?"

"You do."

Magdelene checked. There were certainly a number of strange feelings surging about this way and that, but until now, she'd considered them to be a result of the night's exercise and concentrated on staying alive. A closer look showed their true cause. The demon was right.

"Am I going to be in trouble because of this?" she wondered.

"You mean more trouble?" H'sak asked.

"Good point," Magdelene conceded, diving out of the way as the demon took up the chase again.

Five circuits of the room later, he sagged against the door, gasping.

"But why," Magdelene panted, a little winded herself, "kill me?"

"Prestige," H'sak told her, puffing out

his chest so the scales gleamed. "What matter that I was captured and held when I've just killed the most powerful wizard in the world."

"Me?" Her voice was an incredulous squeak.

"You."

"Because of Adar's power?"

"Hah, a drop in the bucket."

"The most powerful wizard in the world," Magdelene savored the words, then her eyes narrowed. "Demons," she accused, "lie. Swear it on the six Demon Princes."

H'sak sighed. "If it makes you happy during the short time you have left to live, I swear it on the six Demon Princes."

The most powerful wizard in the world, Magdelene thought, leaping the demon's grasping arms and scrabbling to the top of a bulging cabinet. *Me. Wow.*

H'sak demolished the cabinet, but his prestige had already climbed onto the laden shelves above it, barely keeping her footing as years of accumulated junk rained down around her. She snatched a leather bag from the air, ducked an overhand slash that nearly scalped her, and threw the contents in the demon's face.

He screamed a physical impossibility, and both hands went to his eyes.

As silently as she could, Magdelene slipped to the floor and began to move toward the door.

H'sak froze, green tears streaming, his head cocked to catch the smallest noise.

Magdelene's bare foot came down on a yellowed rodent's tooth, and with out thinking, she swore.

H'sak swung at the sound.

Magdelene dropped.

H'sak clutched at air.

Magdelene rolled through the pile of ash that had been her master and up against the ruins of her bed.

H'sak nearly embedded the full length

of his claws in the floor.

Magdelene dodged a vicious swing from the demon's left hand.

H'sak closed his right.

Magdelene looked down at the scaled fingers that nearly encircled her waist, at the tiny trickles of blood from where the tip of each claw just barely pierced her skin, and sighed. H'sak brought up his other hand and completed the circle. Magdelene now wore a girdle of demon flesh that tightened and hoisted her into the air.

As her feet came off the floor, she kicked once or twice in an experimental sort of way, but the claws dug deeper and so she stopped.

"You're going to take a long time to die," H'sak informed her in conversational tones, blinking the last of the powder from his eyes.

"If it's all the same to you," Magdelene replied, just as politely, scrabbling behind her for something, anything, to hit him with, "I'd rather not."

The demon licked his lips.

Magdelene's fingers closed on the edge of something cold and smooth.

"I think"—H'sak almost purred with anticipation—"I'll start at the top and work my way down. This should, after all, be an event. Perhaps I'll begin by sucking the fluid from your eyes."

"Oh yeah, well suck this!" Magdelene screamed, and slammed Adar's mirror down on the ridge of bone between the demon's ears, hoping to startle him enough for her to squirm free.

It was difficult to know who was more startled, the demon or Magdelene herself, when the mirror, with a loud slurp, responded to the wizard's order and did exactly as it was told.

Breathing heavily, Magdelene stared at the mirror lying face down on the floor then squatted beside it. She pushed at it with the tip of one finger. It skidded a few

inches. Moving slowly, ready to leap back at any further display of initiative, she flipped it over.

Receiving no further instructions, the mirror held what it had swallowed.

Trapped within the glass, H'sak roared in silent rage, fists uplifted to pound against his new prison.

Pounding?

Magdelene shook her head. No, that wasn't coming from the mirror.

"Open this door! Open I say in the name of the king!"

She looked at the door. She looked at the mirror. She looked at the demon marks around her waist. She looked up to the heavens. "Why me?" she wailed.

The pounding continued.

"Stuff a sock in it!" she screamed, just a little on edge. "I'm coming!"

Digging through the wreckage, looking for clothes, the most powerful wizard in the world—newly named—considered her options. The king was going to be royally angry; wizards were rare, and she'd just killed his. There was bound to be unpleasantness, and Magdelene hated unpleasantness. She picked up the old stuffed lizard, which had somehow survived intact, and placed it carefully on the room's one remaining shelf. As far as she could see, there was only one way out: abject surrender. Perhaps groveling. She dragged Adar's robe free and put it on.

At the door, she paused.

"It wasn't really your fault," she reminded herself firmly, and opened it.

Pagrack, just about to demand entry for the second time, snapped his mouth shut at the sudden view of destruction within the room, and let the butt of his spear drop slowly to the ground.

"We heard noises," began the king from behind his guardsman.

Magdelene bowed awkwardly; she hadn't expected the king himself. "There,

uh, was a slight accident."

The king leaned forward and took a quick look around. "A slight accident? Child, if this is your idea of a slight accident, I'd hate to see what you consider a disaster. What happened?"

"Well..." Magdelene shot a look back over her shoulder. H'sak certainly had made a mess of the room. "The demon did it."

"The demon?"

"Yes, Sire. While he was chasing me, he—"

"The demon got loose?"

Pagrack's spear came up as he prepared to defend his king.

"Yes, Sire. But it's all right, I took care of him and—"

"You?" His Majesty looked skeptical. His guardsman merely looked adoring.

Magdelene bristled a little. "Yes, me." She stood aside. There, leaning against the wall, was the mirror. Within the mirror was H'sak. "I trapped him within the mirror and—"

"How?"

"Well, I don't exactly know." Her brow wrinkled. "It was an accident."

"Another accident," said the king. "You appear to have had a busy morning."

"You could say that; yes, Sire."

"Where was your master through all of this?" He took another look around the room. "Where is Adar?"

Magdelene's mouth opened and closed a few times, but nothing came out. Finally, she held out her arm. On the sleeve of Adar's robe was a fine sprinkling of pale grey ash.

The royal brows rose. "Adar's robe," he prompted.

"No, Sire." She indicated the ash. "Adar." A lesser man, on hearing his court wizard, his ace in the hole, had become nothing more than a laundry problem, would have taken his anger out on the bearer of the news. The king,

stronger than that, said only, "One last accident?"

"The first actually." She sighed. "It's kind of a long story. Which," she added, "would go a lot faster if you stopped interrupting, Sire."

"Your pardon." He leaned up against the doorframe, crossed his arms over his chest, and gave every indication of settling in for a long stay. "Tell," he commanded.

So she did.

"The most powerful wizard in the world..." the king said speculatively as she finished. He studied the demon in the mirror. "So, where do you go from here?"

Magdelene swallowed hard. "You aren't going to detain me? For, uh, what happened to Adar? To replace him?"

"Detain you? How could I?"

The most powerful wizard in the world thought about that for a moment. "Oh. Yeah." This, she decided, was going to take some getting used to.

"And besides," the king added, "I have the safety of my people to think of." With the toe of one boot, he nudged something, shattered beyond recognition, back into the room. "You seem to attract an unusual number of...accidents. I'm reasonably certain it's easier to replace a wizard than a country. I suggest

you head toward less-populated areas. Perhaps south."

South. The pique she'd felt at not being wanted—quite different from not being detained—vanished. South. To never have a runny nose again...

"And what's more," His Majesty continued, breaking into her reverie, "if you take your friend there with you, I'll see what I can do to ease your way. Just in case he gets free again—" His mouth twitched. "—accidentally, of course, better he's with you than me."

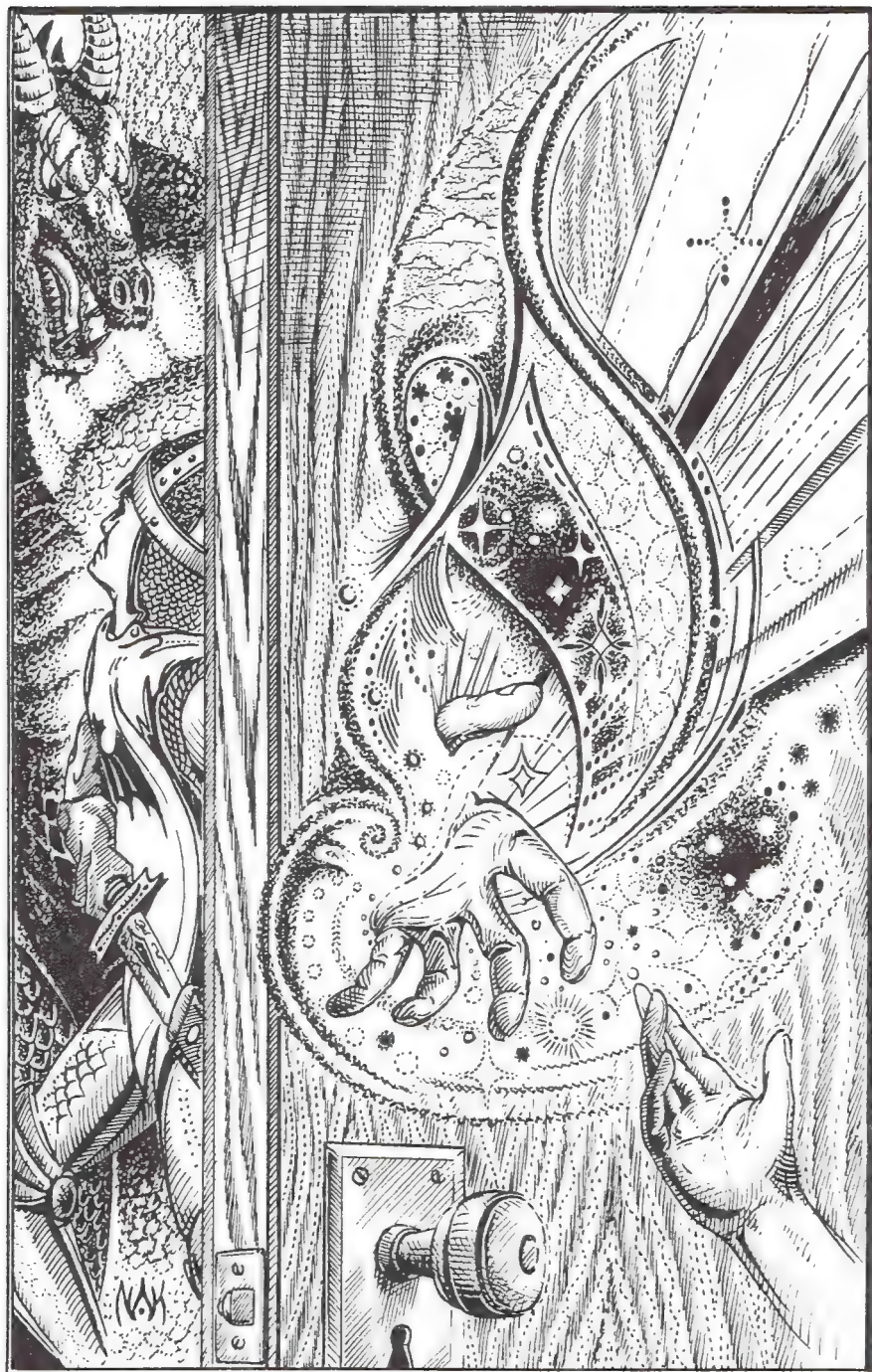
Magdelene dropped a deep curtsy. South. The world was her oyster and she the pearl in it. "Your wish, Sire, is my command."

"How fortunate for us both," replied the king and turned to leave. Pagrick smiled down at her as he made ready to follow his liege, and Magdelene remembered one last bit of unfinished business. Adar's end had been poetic justice of a sort, done in by his own ambition, but she'd always be grateful for the last thing he'd taught her before he died.

"Oh, Sire," she called. The king paused. "Could I, uh, borrow Guardsman Pagrick for a time?" Pagrick flexed, sweated, and sighed all in the space of about two seconds. "I'd like to, uh, clean up the workroom before I go." •

TANYA HUFF, the author of twelve books and 21 short stories, lives and writes in Prince Edward County. When she's not writing she spends her time wondering why the contractors keep pointing a bits of her house and laughing. Her latest book, *No Quarter*, came out from DAW this March.

ILLUSTRATOR: JAMES BEVERIDGE resides in Edmonton but lives in "the aether of the imagination." A being with great love and respect for speculative fiction and art, he hopes to reach the chakra of "Creative Nirvana," no matter in which solar system it is located.



Walking Away

Nicholas de Kruyff

illustrated by Robert Pasternak

I turn, the sweat-soaked leather hilt slips from my fingers, dragon's blood splattered over the front of my mail shirt burning my nostrils with an acrid iron reek. The elves, their faces bone-weary, like business men at four o'clock, shuffle wearily towards me. One puts his arms around my neck, sobbing quietly, the smell of dirt and campfires clings to his matted hair.

"Stay," he whispers.

But it is too late. I already hear the Voices. Their colloquy tingles my skin.

"I'll be back," I say.

Delicate long arms release my neck. He steps away, tears rolling down his silvery cheeks like syrup off a stack of Sunday pancakes. The tall figures part and I trudge through them towards a door that was not there before. Light scintillates off my body. The air about me flows with heat and light.

The door is our bedroom door. I painted it last year and couldn't get that cream color from under my fingernails for days. It all looks like a Dali painting, the door and the elves and the alien grey sky and the flat plains of granite. My hand closes on the cool metal of the knob; suddenly I smell the bluey scent of fabric softener and hear the tumble of the dryer. My heart yearns to be there. I open the door and step into our bedroom.

The walls are the dark green of rose leaves. Fluffy pillows in frilled shams are piled carefully on the smooth, tightly tucked sheets. Bright sunlight. Looking out the window into the front yard I see Samson laying on the front lawn sniffing the air and lapping up the sun. Spring. I've been gone since November.

Over my shoulder I hear her strangled gasp. I can barely turn before she is in my arms, her face against my chest, sobbing, the smell of laundry mingling with the dragon's blood.

"It's all right love," I say quietly. "I'm home."

Her arms squeeze my neck, too tight, making me uncomfortable, like when I must wear a tie.

The men from the Bureau have come to confiscate my armor, my tunic, even my memories of the Land, everything I carried back with me. Men from the Bureau all look like brothers, all of them fat from late night donuts, their skin the color of the uncooked fat on steaks, bags hang beneath their eyes, their shoulders slant under mud-colored trench coats. They all ask questions in the same droning monotone.

"What are elves like, Dimension Walker?"

"How did you communicate, Dimension Walker?"

"Where you conscious of the calculations your mind was processing in order to keep you there, Dimension Walker?"

They read form questions from handhelds and record my answers on DAT. Every question ends with the honorific "Dimension Walker," as if that was a degree I held, instead of being the genetic lottery I won at birth—the lottery that paid off three years ago. All during the questions my wife caresses my hand. She holds it tightly in her lap, her eyes locked on the Bureau men.

Only when they close their screens and are leaving does one ask an important question. He stops in the doorway, the collar of his trench coat half up.

"Out of curiosity, will you miss it?"

"It was wonderland."

He nods wistfully, sighs, and resigns himself to the night. My wife is quick to slam the door and click the locks into place.

First night back. In the dark I ease my hand onto her thigh, careful not to wake

her. Her thigh is hot. She sighs. A breeze blows in the open window, bringing the thick smell of dew on fresh cut lawns. Light from the street squeezes through blinds, arrives in stripes on rose leaf walls. Samson snores at the bottom of the bed. Drowsiness slides over me like a water spider skimming across a lazy creek, and I slip into a sleep unbroken by dreams. Home.

I had forgotten the warmth of this sun.

The patio door slides open and I hear her bare feet pad across the deck to me. She crouches, her jeans rubbing in a whisper, and kisses me, strands of strawberry blonde hair tickling my face.

"I baked you cookies, my lovie."

"I don't remember what chocolate tastes like."

"Like this."

She feeds me chunks of oven-warm crumbling cookie held together by rivets of gooey chocolate. My eyes close in rapture. Inside, the phone rings.

"You going to answer it?" My eyes open and squint up at her.

She shakes her head. "I need to get as much of you as I can while you're here."

I hold her hand. She smiles and presses it to her face.

"What?" I prompt.

"Nothing. Just hold me."

As we hug Samson steals over and eats the rest of the cookies lying on the plate.

I wake. Downstairs, Samson's feral barks. Something wrong for him to bark like that. Rain on the roof. Water sheeting over the windows. She starts awake. I touch her shoulder and put my finger to my mouth. I rise.

The handle of a hammer is placed into my hand.

"I keep it under the bed when you're gone," she whispers.

My feet tread silently on the stairs. It's like I'm back with the People, walking through the Thrull's Forest, stepping just so on the humus and dead leaves, leaving no sound, no trace of passage. At the bottom of the stairs I crane my head a fraction of a hair into the hallway.

The front door swings open in the incoming wind and rain. The wooden frame is splintered where the deadbolt tore through leaving jagged daggers of wood. Samson, crouching, barks at the square of night beyond the door.

Then the Opening comes, shimmering waves of light irradiating the doorway, pieces of sunlight dancing in the raindrops like tame fireflies, ripping a hole in this dimension. I see beyond, to the Land, to a crevasse at the base of a bluff where the dragon hunters lie in pools of water and blood; hands, arms, fingers lying apart from their bodies. The earth and corpses scorched black. Wisps of smoke curl off them.

"What is it? Some one tried to break in?"

"No. Someone was trying to call me."

Walking with Sam at the beach is a mini odyssey—him Odysseus, me Telemachus; him running below on the beach, his dexterous paws falling between sculptures of driftwood, coils of rusted wire, broken concrete bricks, cracked sewer pipes big enough for a man to walk in, burned and rusted car bodies, as he quests for smells and messages of scent; me atop the small ridge, sidestepping dog droppings and thinking.

Why must I always leave to realize how much I miss her? Why don't I ever miss her that much when I'm here?

My eyes wander across the surface of the great flat lake to where the water

meets the sky ... the distant sparkle of light on water, the fireflies of light ... I see through a doorway ... a three-mast clipper under full sail cutting through the green-grey water. Wind combs my hair and sprays my face. Off the port bow, flukes of dolphins slice the water's surface. On their backs ride sea fawns, hair long and wavy like beds of kelp and skin pink as conch shells. Somewhere Voices talk like a choir of crystal bells. The Voices. My skin tingles as if it has been washed hard by a wooden brush with stiff new bristles.

The Voices invite me to the Land. Come now. Without thinking I step forward.

A thought of her stops me.

I twist away and fall, panting. The Voices stop.

"Don't go," I tell myself. "You'll miss her."

Sam trots in before me, fur dripping, tail wagging. I wrestle off my windbreaker as she comes from the kitchen, the aroma of garlic following her. She rises on toes and kisses my cheek.

"I've got spaghetti sauce simmering," she taunts, her finger playfully flicking my earlobe.

"Great. That's nice."

Her face dampens, becomes apprehensive. She steps away from me.

"You certainly turned grumpy all of a sudden."

I shoulder past her into the kitchen, pass the steel pot on the stove that steams the air with smells of onion and tomato, trying to keep my face away from her so she cannot read it.

"I'm fine. Just a bit tired. Smells good." It's not a good lie. Perhaps I didn't mean it to be.

She crosses her arms. "You're lying." I shrug.

"You've heard the Voices, haven't you?"

"Yes." My voice is small in my ears.

"You're going to leave."

"I want to be with you."

"But you also want to leave."

"I promise I'll stay long enough to say good bye this time, and then I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Is that suppose to make me feel better? Thanks a lot for that minute extra you can hold out for me."

"Do you think I planned this?"

"Fair? Is it fair that you leave me for months alone? When you're gone I can't remember what you look like. Then all of a sudden without any warning you materialize out of thin air into my life, stay for two weeks, or a month, just long enough for me to remember what you look like and how much I love the smell your skin, then you leave. If that's fair then fuck fair."

Her eyes drop tears onto her cheeks. She leaves them there.

"And when you're here I hate it cause I can hold and touch you and feel you're warmth on my cheek, but then I look into your eyes and see how faraway they are ... and I know you're going to Walk again soon ... and ... you're going to die out there and I'll never know how, I'll always be waiting..."

She turns, runs up the stairs, sobs sputtering from her lips.

In sleep she twists. Small whines, like blind puppy's whimpers, escape her lips.

After the medical at the Bureau, I take her to lunch at our favorite spot.

We stand on a street corner eating sausages from a street vender. Cars hiss blue smoke at a red light. The light switches green and they purr off down the street happy as kittens. Past us walk

shoppers with stuffed department store bags and business men in suits the color of blue ink and youths with slouches and holes in jeans and I watch their faces and she shuffles from one foot to another.

"Do you love me?" my wife asks.

My eyebrows furrow. "You know I do."

"Then why do you leave me?" Her voice is curious, not accusing.

I look down to the sidewalk. My heart feels like an over-revved car engine whining and belching blue smoke.

"I do love you. Every inch of me for the past seven wonderful years has been constantly in my love with you.

"But another part of me stays out there, calling for the rest of me. Since the moment I first heard the Voices and saw the firefly lights it was like finding I had another hand. And when I go with that other part of me it's like visiting a land where your grandfather came from and even though you've never been there before you belong.

"You see? I can never be in only one place, 'cause part of me is always locked in the other."

"I took the test. I've tried to follow you."

"Oh, love, thank you." Only a handful of the billions on this earth have found they can Walk.

We shuffle forward, our feet dragging along the slick pavement. At the entrance of a small park I ask her if she wants to go in and sit for a few minutes under the shady branches.

"No. I want to stay home."

The sky above the lake is the blue of a baby boy's room, clouds like scribbled crayon marks hold back the sun. Same old sky. Samson trots into the water to sniff a fish floating belly up in the waves.

My heart feels like a swollen finger.

I sit on the bluff's edge, dangling my feet, and scan the horizon for dolphin flukes. Insects buzz in the grass nearby.

I honestly don't know how long my mind flirts on the edge of the horizon, but when I look down Sam is dead.

About twenty feet out in the water lies the broken remains of a sewer pipe, dumped there, its reinforcement rods bent and twisted. The waves rocked his body back and forth, the rods grip him, matted into his fur.

And the Voices scream for me to come and light sparks off my skin and I begin to flow away—with all the will I can summon I stand up and run in the opposite direction, to home.

"You could have at least brought him home."

From the edge of our bed my hand eases across the distance between us and touches her ankle. "I can't control it. It was difficult even holding off to come here."

She doesn't speak. As my fingers slide off her skin she springs up and wraps her arms around my neck. My hand rubs the

softness of her back.

"Stay."

The word twists my guts like I've swallowed bleach. I hear the Voices. Their speech tingles my skin.

"Part of me will."

Gently I pry her arms from my neck, kiss her wet cheeks, and let her go.

The din of the Voices. The hurly-burly of guilt and sorrow. A feeling of uncertainty. This is the only thing I can do, isn't it? My body brightens like a wick taking flame. The air glitters with the flight of a thousand fireflies as I open the bedroom door and step onto the deck of a three-mast clipper. The door closes and I smell salt air.

I can hear hammering on the other side of the door.

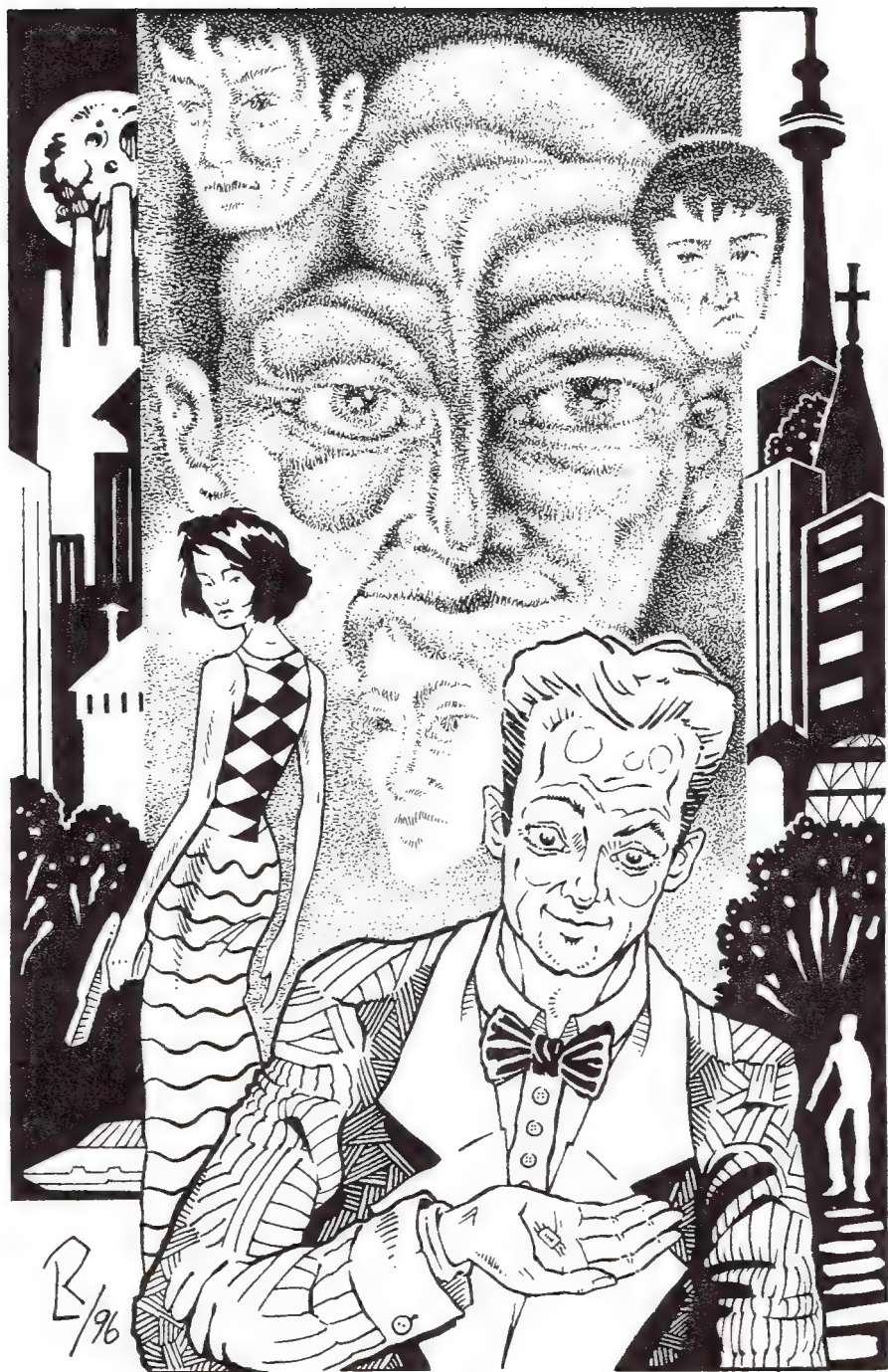
Gut twisting, I turn quickly and try to push back through, feeling the impact of the hammer-blows forcing the nails in place. The door bows slightly from my weight but stays shut. I can't get back. The hammering stops. I hear sobbing. It's me.

That door fades forever and the fireflies wink out. •

NICHOLAS DE KRUYFF is a writer and actor (he's allergic to a steady income) who lives in Toronto. "Walking Away" is his second appearance in *ON SPEC*.

ILLUSTRATOR: As you read this, ROBERT PASTERNAK is probably playing silly games with his two year old son, Annachie, who is much smarter than Robert, who falls for the same trick every time. Robert has recently provided cover art for a Phyllis Gottlieb collection titled *Blue Apes* from

Tesseract (shh, but he actually did the painting in 1984).



R/96

Face Dances

Rebecca M. Senese

illustrated by Richard Leggatt

Nick smiled when he thought of the police searching for a blond man with another face.

He'd made it into the park across the street moments before the first siren screeched like some prehistoric bird in the late afternoon. Running from tree to tree, he fried the wig in a garbage can. The heat would confuse the police sensors, giving him another diversion. In those few critical moments he would be able to do something about his face.

The thick bush he finally found to hide in was some bastard pine hybrid. Sticky sap clung to his shirt as he crouched down, peering at the crumpled picture of a man's face printed from one of the numerous, anonymous catalogue disks he subscribed to. First he stared at that face, memorizing the lines, the tilt of the nose, then looked into a small hand mirror. His current face stared back, different lines, a different tilt. Concentrate. Think about that catalogue face, that other face. He studied one then the other, one then the other. Slowly the face in the mirror shifted, changed, features melting and blending, becoming indistinct. Then they sharpened, changing to match the catalogue face, a perfect reflection.

Beads of sweat popped from his newly formed forehead, testament to his strenuous efforts. He rested a moment, catching his breath. But he couldn't rest for long. The police were still looking for him, and although he looked sufficiently different to ignore, if one cop decided to be zealous about searching everyone he could be in big trouble.

After changing his clothes and frying them in another garbage can, he tucked the withdrawal cubes into the waist of his pants. Now he was ready. He stepped out onto the path.

A blue sensor beam hit him full in the face. He swallowed his panic, forcing himself to stand still and relax. They couldn't know it was him, he wasn't in the bank long enough for them to get a DNA reading.

The beam switched off and a young cop lower his pulser gun. "Sorry sir, we're

looking for a suspect. Have you seen this man?" He held up a holo cube and triggered the image.

Nick pretended to study it, frowning slightly for effect. "No, I'm sorry, I haven't seen anyone like that."

"Thank you, sir. You'd better leave the park now." The cop moved away, holding his gun at ready. Nick took his advice and hightailed it out of there.

Riding the shuttle out of downtown, he smiled again, his hand stealing a pat at his waist. He hadn't had a chance to check the amount but he was sure the take was close to five hundred thousand. Not bad for a half hour or so, not counting the two months preparation.

Gotta love my face, he thought.

The next day, Nick spent three hours making the two-kilometer trip across the city to see Benji. On the way, he changed his face three times, lunched on a rooftop café, and picked up his makeup bag from a locker in the speedtrain station. Benji knew him as a master of disguise, assuming he used makeup to effect his changes. Nick wasn't about to shatter the man's illusions.

Sitting on an old wooden chair, Benji was putting the finishing touches on a pair of leather moccasins when Nick walked in.

"Hey Bill," Benji called. He raised one large, thick-knuckled hand in a wave. The chair groaned.

"Nice pair of moccasins," Nick said. "How long does it take you to make them?"

Benji shrugged and scratched at his crooked nose. He could afford to have it straightened but it was a badge of honor. Got it in his first bust, he always bragged. "Depends how much time I've got and how much heart. What's doing?"

"I have some pretty rocks for you." Nick set the bag down on the table beside Benji. Leaving the moccasins, Benji pulled the cord on a floater lamp hovering near the ceiling. It descended to hover closer to the table. Thick fingers fiddled with the bag. It took Benji a while to open it but Nick didn't offer to help. Ever since they'd fused the nerves during his last bout of prison, Benji had had a hard time with fine finger movements. It spelled death to his career as a safecracker but Benji was not deterred. He'd become a clearing house, using contacts acquired in his vast career to arrange the movement of certain acquired items. Making moccasins helped him keep his fingers working. Sort of.

Once the bag was open, Benji spent a few minutes studying the diamonds. A smile flittered over his ugly face.

"Lovely," he purred. "I'm glad you finally decided to part with these. I have people practically pissing their pants for them."

Nick smiled. "Eloquent as always, Benji."

They haggled over the cost, Benji grumbling before giving into Nick's price. He handed over the cash chips and stocks. As Nick tucked the bills safely into the waist of his pants, Benji waved one large hand at him.

"Hey, I heard something you might be interested in."

Nick was already thinking of a vacation with sun-drenched sand. "Hmm?"

"Yeah, Dopler's coming out with a new chip, supposed to revolutionize the net. Lots of people interested."

"How interested?"

Benji's eyes twinkled. "Almost ten M's worth is how I hear it. If you're listening."

Nick was definitely listening. With ten million he could buy his own island

down south and have enough change to live comfortably for a while. Quite a while.

"Dopler's based in Geneva," Nick said.

"Yeah, but the big cheese lives in Toronto, keeps his head office here, nice and cozy. Rumor has it the chip is here and will only be shipped for production when the announcement is made."

"What's the big deal with it?"

Benji shrugged, a lopsided movement of his massive shoulders. "Dunno, Bill, I never was a nethead but I know people who are and they're buzzing with it. Pressuring me for potentials. Of course I mentioned you."

Nick smiled easily. If he took the job and succeeded, Benji got a nice cut for his reference. Easy money, minimal risk. Usually Nick was leery of reference jobs, too many times his risk was too high. But Benji had been on the frontline himself and knew how to gauge the potential, see all the hazards. He trusted Benji's judgment. As much as he trusted anyone's.

"I could be interested."

Benji nodded. "How about drinks at Rafe's, around eight?"

"Fine."

Benji smiled, his face twisting into a horrible grimace. "I'll set it up."

The line outside Rafe's Italian Restaurant was long, but when the maître d' spotted him, Nick was quickly ushered inside. They bypassed the main dining room, heading down a dimly lit hallway. Nick's feet sank into the two-inch thick carpeting. At a heavy, dark door, the maître d' knocked, listened, then pressed his palm to the reader beside it. The door clicked open and with a bow, the maître d' waved Nick inward.

The walls were papered with dark

green velvet. Plush burgundy curtains framed windows shuttered with black steel panels. A wide black onyx table glistened beneath a single hoverlamp. In the corners of the ceiling Nick noticed small jammers hovering unobtrusively. The lights on their sides blinked a steady green.

With a glance at the bodyguards beside the door, Nick took his seat at the table. Benji sat at his right, trying to look casual. He could have taken some lessons from the elegant man sitting beside him. He openly studied Nick with cool, grey eyes set in a pale face. Beside him, another man, black curly hair unmanageable on his head despite the obvious effort, hunched inside his black suit as if it were as uncomfortable as a suit of armor. Uncertainty reflected in his eyes, unlike the woman who sat in the final place at the table. Dressed in a long-sleeved, forest green dress, she merely looked bored.

"Thank you for joining us, Mr. Levine," the elegant man said. "I am Mr. Brantford. My associates Mr. Cresswell and Ms. Drier."

Cresswell bobbed his head, curly hair spilling farther on his forehead. Ms. Drier sipped her wine without looking at him.

"You're looking to acquire a particular item," Nick said to Brantford.

Brantford smiled, his mouth full of perfectly straight, white teeth. False, Nick thought, possibly temporary for this meeting, like the smooth, plastic-looking skin of his face giving him nondescript features. Must be high up in the computer world if he was this cautious about being recognized in a place so renowned for secrecy.

"A very particular item, Mr. Levine." Brantford lit a cigarette, blowing smoke up toward the hoverlamp. The paleness

of the smoke matches his hair, Nick thought; he must be almost albino. At his gesture, one of the thugs filled Nick's glass with a red liquid. One sip and Nick's eyes widened. Real wine, not the synthetic stuff. Brantford and his friends had a lot of money.

"Dopler Technologies has developed a new chip which is poised to revolutionize the industry," Brantford said. "It would place them head and shoulders above the rest of us and it would be years, possibly decades, before we could catch up. Such an imbalance would be disastrous. We want to get a copy of the chip to head off this situation."

"What's so special about this chip?"

Cresswell leaned forward, his elbows wrinkling the table cloth. "I don't think it's necessary for you to know that."

Nick turned an impassive look on Cresswell. "If it has even the slightest impact on this job I have to know."

Cresswell flushed and slouched back in his chair. Beside Nick, the Drier woman chuckled. Nick glanced over at her. He'd assumed she was just Brantford's current appendage; now he wasn't so sure.

The albino man's expression was as impassive as Nick's. "The chip is a new development in nano technology. My intelligence tells me it's partially organic."

Nick's eyes widened. Organic. He began to understand Brantford's concern. An organic chip would be self sufficient, able to repair itself and distinguish between useful and harmful tampering, could possibly even begin to change itself, acquire new pieces. Learn.

Maybe it would become conscious.

A conscious computer chip would know all the tricks, would be able to infiltrate any normal database with ease.

Brantford nodded. "I see you comprehend what this means." He glanced over at the woman. She nodded.

Nick looked over at her, studying the round, pale face framed by dark hair pulled back into a roll. Green eyes, heightened by the color of her dress, looked at him. Did he detect a hint of amusement in them?

"We believe you are right for this job," Brantford said. "We've already decided on when it should be done. We just need one more person."

Finally Nick turned back to him. "One more person?"

"It's a two-person job," she said. Her voice was a deep purr.

Her name was Casey Drier, he learned, and she was an expert at disguises. Almost as good as Nick, she claimed. As they worked on the job, Nick began to wonder if Brantford's plan was the best. Stealing the chip in the middle of a full-blown reception seemed inordinately risky but after studying Dopler's movements he begrudgingly agreed.

"I'm glad you're beginning to see it our way," Casey said one evening. She lounged against the arm of the sofa, swirling wine in her glass. "Dopler has bodyguards up to his eyeballs. The only time he loosens up is at his receptions. I bet he even screws with them hanging around. I wonder what his wife thinks about that?"

"Maybe she asks them to join in. Are you sure these are the most recent plans?"

He scrolled through the building plans hologram hovering over his desk. Casey set her glass down on the coffee table and walked over to stand beside him.

"These show the most recent renovations here and here." Her hand moved

through the ghostly walls which lit up green when her fingers touched the part she wanted.

"That means there's only three entrances, including the main ballroom/courtyard. These two will be locked and watched. I think our only way out is through the main one."

Casey sat down at the table. "That means walking through the reception. Is that a good idea?"

He glanced over at her. Her expression was slightly worried, a significant display for her. He'd learned quickly that she parcelled out her expressions as carefully as he did.

"Going out either of the other two exits would raise questions," he said. "We're using Dopler to get us in; once we discard him, we can't be sure there won't be a DNA sampler at the exit, or even a palm reader. I won't have time to copy those things."

"Why would he have those precautions on the way out?"

Nick smiled. "We've been watching him for three months and you ask that? I think he's paranoid enough."

She looked unhappy but she nodded. "Okay, Bill. Let's go over the wife again."

The hologram popped up displaying Mrs. Dopler. She wore a chic silver and grey suit, collar upturned in the latest fashion. Nick had to admit that Casey had roughly the same build but their faces were a study in contrasts. Where Casey's nose was thin, Mrs. Dopler's was large and bulbous, where Casey's cheekbones were well defined, Mrs. Dopler's were flat, where Casey's lips were lush and sensual, Mrs. Dopler's were thin and defined. Some of Casey's features could be built up but would it be enough to convince the husband?

The door opened and Cresswell

slipped in, brushing moisture from his curly hair. He cursed lightly.

"Damn rain, why don't they schedule it for night?"

Nick snorted with amusement as Cresswell shrugged off his coat, hanging it on a hook by the door. It promptly fell to the floor. He ignored it.

Moving to the table, he peered at the holo. "That the wife?"

Nick thought he looked like a badger, the way his face wrinkled up, making his nose look even bigger. But that was probably an overestimation of his intelligence.

"This is the full-body holo," Casey said. "Did you get a closeup of her face like I asked?"

Cresswell reached into the pocket of his rumpled trousers. He flipped a projection cube at her. "Knock yourself out."

Casey caught it easily. "I'm going to try out her look." She headed across the room toward the bathroom.

"And Dopler?" Nick said.

"Fredrick Johanson Dopler," Cresswell said. "Born in '98 in New York, just before the housing riots. His mother was one of the organizers and they spent most of his childhood dodging the National Guard. He emigrated to Toronto in '14 when he was a teenager and got drafted into the Compuwars. After that, he started working on network security, building up a reputation in the industry for his nearly impenetrable data bases. The Q chip is his most recent achievement."

"Q chip?"

"The nano chip. He's been working on it for almost three years."

"Did you get anything more on the chip itself?" Nick asked.

Cresswell shook his head, black curls bobbing around his ears. "The security

around that chip is tighter than a virgin's ass. You know as much as we do."

Nick flicked off the holos. The glow faded, leaving the slick surface of the table. Deceptively slick, its black depths hiding the complex machinery of the holo displayer. Nick wondered if it was the only deceptive thing in the room.

"So basically all we really know are rumors," he said, leaning back in his chair. The leather molded around the muscles of his back. "I guess I'm wondering why you're going to all this trouble for a rumor?"

Cresswell stiffened. A flush rose in his cheeks turning the skin a blotchy red. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Nick's expression hardened. "It means I don't believe you when you tell me you don't know anything else, you little shit. My ass is the one on the line and unless you want to find somebody else to do the job, you'd better start talking."

Cresswell's hands knotted into fists. Nick leaned forward, tensing his legs, getting ready in case Cresswell decided to make a big mistake.

"Boys," Casey's voice interrupted. "Why don't you give the testosterone a rest?"

Both men turned to look at her. Nick's eyes widened in surprise.

"So what do you think?" Casey said.

She looked exactly like Mrs. Dopler.

It couldn't be makeup, Nick thought. He kicked at a pile of sludge on the foot path. The rain had stopped in the late afternoon, leaving behind the smell of wet earth and squished worms. The park was empty except for the sound of water dripping off the trees and the sucking sound of Nick's shoes on the muddy path.

If not makeup, then what? He didn't want to think the thought but it snuck up on him in spite of his defenses. The clues were there: every time he'd seen her she'd looked a little different, her cheekbones shifted, her nose sharper, her eyes wider. Like she was taunting him the whole time, daring him to ask, daring him to wonder.

An expert at disguises.

Who was she?

He'd never met anyone else who could do what he did. Of course, how would he know? The thought brought a dry chuckle.

Where had she come from? He'd done just enough research to know his ability to mimic other people's facial features had to be genetically engineered. He'd stopped short of trying to find out who and where. Calling attention to himself could be a big mistake. Several conclusions were obvious: if his ability had been designed, somehow he'd been taken, stolen, from the designers and placed in an anonymous Central Home to grow up orphaned and unclaimed, just another ward of the state. Not exactly the future his designer had probably envisioned, Nick thought. He could imagine what they were looking for: the perfect spy, the perfect double. Of course to control him they would have to devise something to keep him loyal. He avoided imagining what.

She had to be another one, like him. How else could she affect those minor changes? She must do them automatically, he thought; they were so subtle no one else would spot them. Most people would see them but incorporate them into what they thought she looked like without really noticing. But he'd spent his whole life watching faces. Her subtle shifts were like flashing signs to him.

The real question was why did she do

it? He maintained his face in its look rigidly, not allowing any kind of fluctuation for fear someone might notice. Why would she take that risk?

And where did the job fit into this? Did Brantford know about her ability? Cresswell didn't. The man was a flunky and not a very good one, he thought scornfully, but Brantford was too hard to read.

Was it possible that he not only knew about Casey, but knew about Nick as well?

How could that be? And how was he going to find out?

"I can get you an easy twenty for these, Bill."

"That's good, Benji, I'd like it by midnight."

His brow wrinkled. "Why so fast? You're going to have plenty in a few days. More than you can spend in a lifetime."

"As long as the job goes well."

"Of course the job'll go well, these guys are pros. I wouldn't set you up with anybody else, you know that. Sure it's risky as hell but it's a hell of a lot better than those banks and jewelry stores. You'll never have to do a little job like that again, never have to risk some zealous cop with a grudge and a pulser gun."

"It'll set you up nicely too."

"Sure, but I wouldn't risk you if I didn't think it was legit. You and me are friends, Bill."

Yeah, we're friends, Nick thought on the way home. Or as close to friends as he'd ever gotten. It wasn't Benji he was uneasy with.

At the final briefing yesterday Casey had sat beside him as they studied the plans of the reception hall. Brantford had smuggled someone in wearing a pinhole high def camera with special sonar at-

tachment for proper depth perception. Nothing substantial differed from the plans he and Casey had been memorizing but both watched intently anyway.

"Dopler prefers to present any new advancement himself," Brantford said. The smooth skin of his cheeks glistened in the sunlight that streamed from the transparent wall on his left. "Partly it's his arrogance and partly it's his paranoia, but it works to our advantage. At any suggestion, he'll want to take a look at the chip again."

On Nick's right, Casey shifted in her seat. Nick glanced at her covertly. Her dark hair fell in waves past her face, past her perfectly sculptured cheekbones. Her green eyes looked slightly wider today.

"Tomorrow afternoon, Mrs. Dopler is going to the hairdresser in preparation for the reception," Brantford continued. "That is where we will make the switch. According to my information she will be at 900 Yorkville, Salon d'André at five pm. Casey, I would like you to be there at four."

She nodded.

"The bodyguard?" Nick asked.

"We'll take him there," Brantford said. "William, you will be replacing him until you get into the reception and Dopler gets close to the chip."

Nick leaned back, listening to the finalization of the details. He knew them by heart. Instead, he watched Casey. Her hands rested lightly on the table as she leaned forward, listening to Brantford. Her expression was all business, definitely a professional, no matter what else she was. Normally Nick would be pleased to work with her, but too many questions floated in his mind. And Brantford. The albino man was smiling now, looking well pleased.

Too smooth, Nick thought.

So he'd prepared. It was too late to pull out; doing so would ruin his reputation. He'd never get another contract like this again. But he didn't just take their word. His own contacts verified how coveted the chip was. With a new face, a new set of ID, he may be able to make this job pay off more than even Benji had expected.

Sorry about this, Benji, he thought, but I have to cover my own ass. He knew the ugly con would understand that sentiment.

At four, the Salon d'André was deserted. Casey sat in the back room, staring out a window, nervously rubbing her cheek. Nick shifted uncomfortably in his suit, fibra-steel of gunmetal grey with metallic sheen, stiff with bullet protectorant. It was especially warm with the tuxedo beneath. He tugged at the collar. Why couldn't bodyguards spend the extra money and get the flexi-suits? he wondered.

"Is she here yet?" Casey asked again.

"Not yet," Nick said. He watched the profile of her face. Today her nose was a shade sharper.

"How did you get into this business?" he asked.

She turned to look at him, surprised. It was the first time she'd looked at him today. "Are you kidding?"

He shrugged. "Just passing time." He pretended to study his shoes, aware she was still looking at him.

"The money," she finally said. "I needed some. A lot."

For what? he wondered. He looked back at her round face. Had she paid to have this done to her, could it be done that way?

"You have a lovely face," he said.

She stared at him, lips parted slightly but her jaw was clenched. He watched

the muscles flex.

Behind him the door slid open. Cresswell's voice said: "She's here."

Taking Mrs. Dopler and the bodyguard proved easy. They waited until she was getting her hair shampooed before moving in. Nick listened to her struggle from the back room. Casey sat at the window, staring at her hands.

After five minutes of silence, Cresswell popped his head in. "We're ready."

Casey looked up. "I need some time to do up my face."

Nick turned back to her.

"Why don't you go get yourself ready as the bodyguard, Bill?" she said. Her tone allowed no measure for argument.

He stared at her until the door slid shut, cutting off the view of her round, perfect face. He could have sworn he saw her cheeks flattening even as he watched.

Cresswell led him to the small change room where the bodyguard lay unconscious.

"I had them bring up your things," Cresswell said. He gestured to the small case beside the door. "Need anything else?"

"Just privacy," Nick said. He looked pointedly at Cresswell.

Blotches of red rose in his skin. "Fine," he sneered. The door snapped shut behind him.

Nick bent to make sure the guard was really out, then opened his case. He shuffled the makeup to make it look used then sat back on his heels. He stared at the guard. His face was wide, strong chin, thin nose at the bridge, widening to sharp, distinct nostrils. His lips were thick. No cheekbones to speak of on his fleshy face. Long delicate eyelashes brushed Nick's thumb as he lifted the eye lid to check the eye color. Brown.

He stared at the face. Concentrate. See the features, the chin, the nose, the cheeks. Feel them. He breathed deeper, deeper. His heart beat faster. His mouth dried out. Concentrate.

As always, he felt the first change in his cheeks as a tingling sensation, like a sleeping foot being shaken away. Pain shot through the odd sensations of muscles flexing, moving, shifting. He felt his jaw stretching, widening. The joint cracked with a loud pop. He whimpered in his throat, the only sound he could make now. His lips were not yet finished.

He closed his eyes. Concentrate. Sharp tingles in his eyelids, shooting down his nose. His nostrils itched like crazy. His gums blazed. The skin on his forehead stretched until it felt like it would snap.

His shaking hands dug into his thighs. His heart beat a ragged rhythm in his chest. Finally the tingling faded and all he felt was the thin sheen of sweat trickle down his cheek.

When he looked in the mirror, he saw the reflection of the bodyguard.

"You look wonderful, darling," Dopler said to Casey. He didn't even look at her.

"Thank you, dear," Casey said. She looked just like Mrs. Dopler, her hair upswept in a band of curls around the top of her head. By the office door, Nick stood with his hands folded in front of him. His expression was impassive.

"Shall we join our guests, dear?" Casey asked.

Dopler rubbed the bald spot on his head. "Yes I... Yes." He took her arm, straightening his purple tie with the other. "We might as well have some of the food we're paying for."

He led her down the wide stairs, Nick

following discreetly. The carpeting reminded him of the lush carpeting at Rafe's. But here the object was not secrecy. He'd noticed the proliferation of cameras and sensing equipment when they'd "returned" from Mrs. Dopler's hair appointment.

"When is the presentation, dear?" Casey said. Her voice drifted back to him.

"At eight." Dopler looked at his watch. "God, it's almost seven."

"Maybe we should take one last look at the chip, dear, just before we eat."

Dopler's hand fluttered like some deranged bird. "Yes, let's do that."

At the bottom of the stairs, instead of turning right into the ballroom, Dopler led them to the left. Dopler pressed his palm to the lock and punched in a code. At the prompt, he said: "Three."

They followed a narrow hallway, brightly lit. Cameras, imbedded in the ceiling every five feet, stared at them. Nick felt the tingle of alarm barriers across his waist. He knew they even had weight sensors in the floor and in the ceiling. Without the proper clearance anyone entering this hallway would be stopped in seconds. Nick didn't have to wonder how.

When they reached the door, Dopler took several minutes to open it. Finally it slid open, several inches of steel grating along the groove of the door frame. The room beyond was barely ten feet across. Nick felt a chill run up his spine. The temperature was a precise fifteen Celsius, the optimum temperature for the chip. A central pedestal stood at waist level. A clear box sat on top, a row of lights blinking, maintaining correct pressure, correct temperature. Inside, the chip floated suspended in clear fluid, cushioning the delicate membranes from damage.

Nick watched Dopler's face. The tension around his eyes melted as the man gazed at the chip. Wrinkles on his forehead smoothed over. The slight frown of nervousness faded. The constant twitching of his hands stopped and his gestures became fluid.

"See, my darling," he said. "Here is such incredible potential. It's just the beginning, a fledging of the new computer, the new real artificial intelligence."

"It is incredible," Casey agreed. "Take it out of the box please, dear. I can't see it through the liquid."

Dopler looked confused. "But it's clear."

Casey rubbed her eyes with her fingertips. "It must be the hairspray. Everything's been fuzzy since I left the hairdresser's. I do so want to see it clearly, dear. Your real triumph."

Dopler smiled, his thin chest puffed out with pride. "Of course, darling."

His carefully groomed fingers punched out the codes on the keyboard. The row of lights flashed once then blinked off. A soft click sounded and with a hiss, the lid of the box opened.

Now, Nick thought. He touched his belt. Casey stepped toward Dopler. Her hand casually touched his left arm, just as a wife might touch her husband. Nick snapped the projector from his belt and triggered it. Dopler stiffened as he felt the pin prick of the needle in Casey's palm. He didn't have a chance to utter a sound; the sedative was immediate.

"Help me with him," Casey whispered, too low for the audio sensors to hear. Nick set the projector by the wall and together they lowered the man to the floor. Dopler's eyes were closed. His chest rose and fell rhythmically.

Now was the tricky part. They hadn't counted on the hallway being so filled

with cameras. Nick had been planning to send Casey out to watch for guards. But it wouldn't work now. The projector was broadcasting a scene to the room cameras showing Mrs. Dopler in the room. She couldn't be in the hallway as well.

Nick stripped off the guard's suit, revealing the copy of Dopler's tuxedo. He crossed to the box. The supporting fluid was cool and smooth on his fingers. The chip, barely the size of a mint, fit easily on the end of his index finger. All this fuss for something so tiny, he thought. He slipped it into the carrier box and then tucked it into his pocket.

He turned back. Casey was kneeling by Dopler, loosening his shirt so he could breathe easier. She looked up, a questioning expression on her Mrs. Dopler face.

"Do you have your stuff?" she whispered.

No way out now, he thought. He knelt across from her. "I don't need it any more than you do."

Her mouth opened, shock making her cheeks tremble. Her features slipped a little.

"Careful," he whispered. "Pay attention."

Her hand went up to her chin and her features steadied themselves. Shock was still evident in her eyes, echoed by fear. "How?"

"You have a bad habit of shifting things a little."

"I... I didn't think anyone would notice."

"No one else would."

She didn't say anything else. She pointed at Dopler.

Nick looked down. The man's face was peaceful. Wide nose, thin chin receding into his neck. Concentrate. Nick took a deep breath and began.

Three minutes later he finished. He sat back on his heels, mopping his new forehead with a handkerchief. Casey smiled and nodded toward the door.

Passing the projector, Nick triggered the second program which showed the guard staying by the door as Mr. and Mrs. Dopler left. Casey threaded her arm through his and they entered the hallway.

With each step, Nick grew more confident. The tricky part was over. All they had to do was get through the reception. Cresswell sat waiting in a car by the front door. Everything was going according to plan. Nick suppressed a smile; not necessarily *their* plan.

They entered the ballroom. Music wove through the crowd. Elegant women and dapper men stood in groups, chatting, laughing, eating. Nick felt the chip in his pocket, Casey's hand on his arm. His gaze swept the crowd, searching. Yes, there was a good one, a third of the way in. Another few minutes and he and Casey would part company. Too bad, he thought, he liked her. Who knew what they could have done together. But he couldn't share. He took a step in, leading Casey.

"Nick," her voice whispered in his ear. "I have something to tell you."

Surprised, he turned to her. How did she know his real name?

"You're under arrest, Nick," she said.

Her right hand held some kind of projectile gun.

He lunged away, pulling her off balance with her hand still on his arm. Her first shot went wild, hitting a man on the arm. He yelled, his arm freezing into an upraised position. Nick was already running when he saw it. Oh my God, he realized, some kind of muscle freezer. She meant to freeze his face!

But he was already primed for his

planned betrayal. Dodging through the crowd the tingling was already starting, his muscles already shifting. He held the image of the chosen face in his mind's eye, careening off people as he ran. Ahead of him, he saw the doors opening. Police in riot uniforms streamed in.

He'd never make it out, Nick realized. They would search everyone for the chip, even if he did manage to change his face. His heart pounded. He'd be sent away, probably to isolation to prevent him from ever seeing anyone's face again.

He wouldn't, couldn't, let that happen.

He still had one idea left.

Behind him, Casey's gun spat again and he felt a prick hit his jaw. He screamed, knocking into a woman in a green dress. Pain flared across his face, drowning out the tingle of his shifting muscles. He stumbled, falling to his knees. His eyes watered, blurring the image of the marble tiles in front of his hands. His left hand fumbled for the box in his pocket, grabbed the edges. One idea left...

The next thing he was aware of was Casey's hand on his shoulder. His eyes teared madly and she handed him a handkerchief. Wiping his eyes, he saw she was still wearing her Mrs. Dopler face. The expression was stricken.

"You shouldn't have tried to run, Nick," she said. "It wouldn't have ended like this if you hadn't."

Two police officers helped him to his feet, securing his hands behind his back with plasti-cuffs.

"What are you talking about?" he asked her.

"After two minutes the effect becomes permanent. The antidote won't work." She gestured at one of the officers. He handed her a mirror and she held it up

for Nick to see.

His face was a disaster. His eyes stared out of the ruin of a nose, flat and warped to one side, cheeks shifted impossibly, the jaw contoured at an angle, his left brow visible, the other one folded into his forehead. Grotesque, a face for the freakshow.

Nick started to laugh.

"Here's the box," one of the officers said. He handed it to Casey who flipped it open and then looked at Nick, puzzled.

"Where's the chip?"

"What chip?" he said, with a chuckle. "I didn't have any chip. You don't have any proof of me taking any chip, only of me impersonating someone. Maybe conspiracy but I believe that was a setup

and won't hold up in court. That's all you have, Ms. Drier, or whoever you are."

Casey's Mrs. Dopler face hardened. "Where's the chip?"

Nick shrugged against the two police officers as they began to steer him away. "Haven't seen any chip," he called to Casey. "But I suggest you try those hors d'oeuvres. They taste delicious." He swallowed elaborately.

His last glimpse of her was the dawning expression of awareness. Her mouth opened, eyes widened in surprise. Not a bad expression, he thought, even on Mrs. Dopler's ugly mug. But he had to admit, he preferred Casey's original.

Such a lovely face. •

REBECCA M. SENESE thrives on a cross-genre lifestyle. She goes from being the President of Space-Time Continuum to a member of Sisters in Crime; from being a horror writer with stories in *Into the Darkness* and another pending in *Exhumed Magazine* to a member of Crime Writers of Canada; from being an Aurora Award nominee for her story "Writing Critique" in *Just Write* to being a student of forensic science. After writing for more than four years, Rebecca continues to explore the boundaries of different genres in her search to discover just what exactly is speculative fiction.

ILLUSTRATOR: RICHARD LEGGATT is a freelance illustrator trying to earn a living by creating artwork which strives towards originality and complexity in both the imagination as well as the execution—disregarding current trends in style. Needless to say, he is starving.

The Thief's Dream

Derek Kingston Fairbridge

I wore the pants of the magpie,
Pockets full of shiny objects,
And walked across miles of checkerboard
Until I remembered
 I could fly.
Squares disappeared
 —a black and white blur
 skim-read newspapers
 melting into grey—
Until the end
 where I landed,
King me,
I said
In the throat of the magpie. •

DEREK KINGSTON FAIRBRIDGE, a graduate of the University of Victoria, lives in Penticton, BC, where he works and puts out his own tiny magazine, *Vanilla Crows*. This poem is his first major publication credit.



Tree of Life

Michael Teasdale

illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

On the morning of my father's last birthday, my brothers and I found him in the tree grove at the edge of the desert with my mother. Our parents stood silent, their hands clasped, looking out on the vast emptiness beyond the kaala grasses.

Behind them stood their fathers, and their fathers' fathers, and all the fathers of the village. I ran my fingers over the rough bark of the trees and could not believe that my father was old enough to join them. My father did not tremble, he did not stoop. His back was straight and his shoulders square and he still looked strong enough to carry me, although decades had passed and I had gained many stone since the last time he had tried. He did not look like a man who had seen fifty hard summers. I could see none of the changes in his body to which the lilies were sensitive, by which they would accept him today, but reject him tomorrow.

"Will it be here?" my mother asked. "Is this where I will find you?"

Father looked back toward the village, glancing past us as though we were no obstacle, then out toward the distant horizon. "This is a good place," he told her. "Here I can look back to my fathers and ahead to my sons."

He stooped and pulled off his sandals, stepping out onto sand that crunched and shifted under him. It moved, sensing his blood so close under his skin, thirsting for the moisture he kept locked in his body. "I will stand here," he told it, and the sand rippled under him, rolling away to wait.

Each of the trees had been men once, fathers, because the desert would take only a man who had given a part of himself to the next generation. The fathers touched the sand with their bare feet and told the desert where they would stand. The desert

listened, the sand waited, and when the fathers returned to sink their roots into it, the desert welcomed them with grasses.

My brothers looked at me, their mute glances urging me on. I was the oldest among them, but also the weakest. This morning, this day, had been the secret fear of my life.

Kesasla, the youngest and most restless of us, moved from foot to foot, and looked up toward the rising sun. "You must go," he said at last. "The sun will not stay long from zenith."

Father nodded, and turned to us with eyes full of the fire of life. He crushed my mother in his arms one last, fierce time. They kissed as though trying to absorb each other. Then he turned away from her and strode off without a backward glance. It was better that way, to leave quickly and coldly, but I had not the strength for it.

I tried to find something to say.

"Will you kill him?" Mother asked me, and her eyes begged for both answers.

Behind me lay a dusty, barren space, an echo of the desert surrounded by kaala green. Demisul, my father's uncle, had told the sand he would stand there, but he had been weak, as I was. He ran from his journey to the lilies, and his oldest son had not been strong or fast enough to catch him. Noon had passed and the lilies had closed before he was caught, and when he had been brought to the swamp the next day, the lilies had ignored him as they ignored everyone who was too old or too young. Demisul had left the desert waiting for him, accepting no other so that nothing would grow in his chosen place. The kaala grass piled up at the edges of the sand pit, unable to spread their life across it.

"I will try to kill him," I told my mother, and turned from my brothers' accusing eyes to follow my father.

It was loud in the village, alive. Children chased each other through the thin streets while mothers scolded them and hung laundry out to dry. A score of diggers were shoring up the bowl-channel of a new canal to carry water across the furthest fields. I stopped there and filled a goatskin. Beyond the group of houses, sowers scattered seeds across new furrows, and ploughmen cracked whips above their beasts.

Father watched these things from the doorway of our house. "You were awake last night," he said.

I laughed at that. In the darkness of the night, I had heard the noise of a last, desperate coupling going on in the loft above me. "As were you. I was at my wheel."

He smiled. "Which of us do you suppose spent our time more pleasantly?"

"You, I should think." Perhaps I should have stayed, should have turned to Shiara in our bed and taken the measure of both my grief and my love in her arms, but I did not. "It seemed wrong to..."

"Nothing would have been right." He shrugged. "What of your work?"

"Perhaps the best I have done in my life."

"Show me."

I led him into my pottery.

Last night, I had risen from my bed and crept to the room where Kelenle, my oldest son slept. I looked down at him and saw my candle-light reflected in his open eyes.

"Tomorrow, I must kill my father," I said.

"As I must one day kill you."

"Why do we do this?"

"Because life demands sacrifice," he quoted my father's words to me as I had once quoted them to him. "Because it is not enough to give our sweat to make the desert green, we must give our blood and our bodies too."

Those words had never satisfied me. I went to my pottery, and put clay on my wheel and turned it through the night trying to find some other answer.

When the first light had stolen through the cracks in the door, a mist of grey and no light to see by, I had raised my hammer over the drying bust of my father. The head was only clay, only flesh, and would someday perish whether I took a hand in its passing or not. I could not bring the hammer down, and when my father entered the pottery that morning, the bust stood solid and perfect on my wheel. My hammer hung from a far wall, its head buried in the wood where I had thrown it.

Father examined my attempt at his features. They belonged to a younger man, a man with more years before him than behind. "I do not want to die," he said simply.

"Will you run, Father?"

"Will you chase me?"

I looked out at our village, at its people, then went outside and took up the canoe that had been left leaning against the door of our house the night before. My brothers had painted and patched it in preparation for our journey. "I will chase you and catch you and carry you under my arm if I must."

Neither of us believed my words. They were squeezed from me by the weight of tradition as old as the oldest trees in the grove. We laughed, neither of us strong or desperate enough yet to cast that weight aside, and then my father and I carried the canoe out of the

village along the oldest path of all. It took us beyond the fields, the trees and the still-short kaala grass. The desert sand baked the soles of my sandals.

We stopped once, propping the canoe on its side and sitting on it while the sand slid hungrily around us. We drank two-thirds of my water there.

"How did you kill your father?" I asked.

"I will not tell you," he said. "How will you kill me?"

"I do not know."

Father rose. "What would you do if I ran? I am still stronger, still faster."

"Stronger than what?" I asked, and he had no answer.

I thought of Demisul, and saw again the barren spot in the world where he had failed to stand. My father's uncle had lived another twelve summers after his time, but when he died, the flies had come and he had smelled so bad that his family had to burn him.

I thought then of Kelenle and rose beside my father to put one hand on his shoulder, squeezing. "You will not."

In time, we came to the swamp. It was humid and dark from the thick mists that obscured the sun except at zenith. I did not let go of my father until I had set the canoe in the water and he had climbed aboard.

In the midst of the swamp, the lilies grew surrounded by broad green leaves that floated on a still sea of algae. Their petals were closed in little flames of ghost white, like purifying fires. We drifted into their midst.

I thought of Demisul, who left behind nothing but ashes and dust, and of Kelenle, who would need more.

"I hit him over the head with my paddle," my father said suddenly. "I could not have brought your grandfather

here otherwise. It was the easiest way, and the lilies took him before he woke up."

It had been a kindness, I thought, but it was too late for me to do for my father what he had done for his. The sun reached its zenith as he spoke, and the lilies opened. Their white petals folded back, spreading wide to reveal wavering stamens and pistils of red or yellow.

Father drew back from them and turned in the boat, facing me with bared teeth and eyes full of fear. "No."

I jumped on him and the boat almost rolled under us.

He tried to twist away. "No," he screamed.

I was heavy, and he had no room to push against me. I caught one arm, but he flailed at me with the other. His knuckles ground into my eye, knocking me back.

"I will not die like this!"

My sight was blurring with tears, both from the blow and from other things. I saw him rise, and I shifted my weight so that the boat pitched under him. He lost his balance and I struck out half-blind. His stomach went soft under my fist, and he doubled over. I hit him again, knocking him to the bottom of the canoe. Before he could recover his breath, I had his arm and was holding it out over the gunwhale while I brushed the skin of his wrist across a lily's puffy red pistil. The stamens uncurled from its side.

Father screamed once when they stung, four of them lancing into his flesh and pumping his veins full of their venom.

He stopped fighting me then, his body going lax under my weight. He sat still and silent, staring down at his

forearm where four gashes bled green while I went back to the stern of the canoe and took up my paddle.

Above us, the sun passed its high point. The lilies closed on themselves, their task complete, their purpose ended.

In the desert, we stopped once more, and I drank the last of my water alone. Father would bring his own up from deep under the desert when he was ready.

"You have killed me," he said then, words already coming to him with difficulty. "I did not think you could."

"My son needs you," I told him. "For him, I could do anything."

A forever time later, when the first full moon of that autumn had risen and poured silver over the village, I left Shiara breathing softly in our bed and stole out to the edge of the grove. Father had grown tall in that time, his roots already spread out around him in a wooden web through the gaps of which were rising the first kaala shoots. Blossoms in red decorated his branches. It would not be long before he bore fruit.

With my eyes closed, I touched the tree, remembering the feel of the bust I had made on his last night, the bust which remained unbroken, a reminder on its shelf in my pottery. Father's features were almost gone now, swallowed by the bark and undetectable by any save a clay-shaper's fingers.

"With every father we plant, we push the desert back a little," I told him. "With every father, there is room and food for more of us. We will grow, and we will spread. When the fathers have covered the world, and the desert is gone, a son neither of us can see yet will have the luxury to die old."

My father stood in the grove before his father, and I would stand in time before him. So it went, from father to son, and from son into father into tree.

So it went, that the desert of death might be pushed back a little by the trees of life. For that, I would be strong. •

MICHAEL TEASDALE is a small-town boy temporarily trapped in Toronto, where he's found a job that pays almost what it costs to live there. His wife shares his exile while his two cats live rent-free in a house he visits on weekends. He sounds much more interesting on paper than he does in real life.

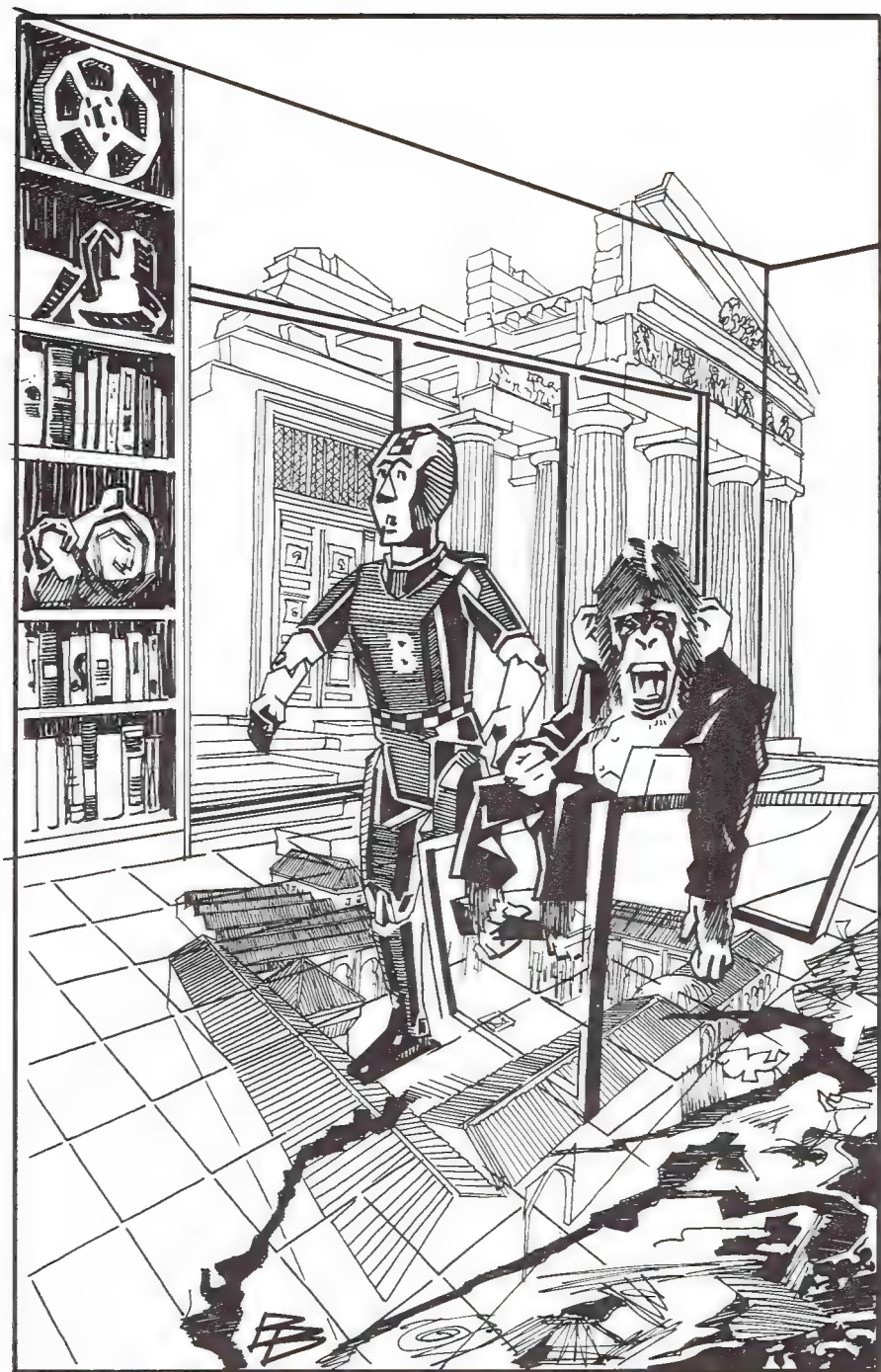
ILLUSTRATOR: LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK has been working as a professional artist for over 15 years. She is a two-time Aurora Award winner and former art director of *ON SPEC*. Her artwork appears on the new CD-ROM *Atlantis to the Stars*. Lynne lives in Edmonton, AB (with the lovely and talented Steve Fahnestalk), where she continues to collect lips and make penguin clocks.

ASK MR. SCIENCE

Do you have a question concerning life or the true nature of the universe? Mr. Science can answer it! Send your questions to Ask Mr. Science, c/o ON SPEC Magazine, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6.

Mr. HW, Jr., of Hagerstown, Md, has inquired as to why his head appears to be shrinking.

A : Your head is not shrinking. The universe is, as you know, continually expanding. Your head is merely no longer expanding with it. This is technically referred to as Cerebro-Spinal Universal Expansion Decoupling Syndrome, and is a non-fatal condition confined almost exclusively to men beyond the age of fifty. It is often associated with the related affliction, Penile Universal Expansion Decoupling Syndrome. Both conditions are currently untreatable and, although several benefit telethons have been produced to raise money to find a cure, there has been no success yet in this research. •



Down and Out in World 3

Erik Jon Spiegel

illustrated by Robert Boerboom

Bernhard Riemann returned home and found a peculiar scene laid out before him. Specifically, he saw himself, or at least his döppelganger, sprawled on the couch having blown his (its? his own?) brains out with a revolver. Against the black leather and chrome of the sofa, his occipital lobe was particularly suggestive of Pollack. Erté, perhaps? No, the pons and VII regions like that, over the cover of an issue of Vogue that had been left there that morning ... that was definitely PoMo. Grey matter, Bernhard was forced to admit on comparison with the paint on the walls, was not so very grey. (Warhol? Lichtenstein?)

He shook his head.

The picture immediately suggested three conclusions, all, he felt, equally absurd: first, that his senses were lying to him, that he was not seeing this; second, that it was possible for him to coexist in two locations simultaneously; third, that it was possible for him to be both alive and dead at the same time. He pulled out his e-book and dialed up the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III* (one hundred and fourteenth edition) and did a quick personality inventory. He determined that he was not insane (at least not by the criteria of the DSM III), but this was of little comfort, since the universe apparently was, and his mind unhappily succumbed to a number of conflicting thoughts about kingdoms of the blind and one-eyed men ... begets Polyphemus, begets Odysseus, begets Ulysses, begets Joyce ... a chain of reasoning

that quite effectively precluded any further reflection.

A part of his mind was still trying to determine to which school of modern art his living room now belonged. Another part was attempting to ascertain the protocol raised by the situation. Where does one sit with a corpse in the room? Is it impolite to stare? Why did it have to die with its eyes open?

His wife came home, then, wearing a jerky dress—strips of dried and preserved beef stitched together in the latest *au couture* pattern. She wore it in the fashionable Amazon style: it covered only her right breast, leaving the left exposed. Over her left nipple she wore a hologram animation of a blinking eye, so that as her breast jiggled, the eye appeared to wink.

Bernhard struggled to incorporate all of this into his most distressing predicament. *It must mean something*, he thought. *There must be some symbolism here*. Symbolism, after all, was the way the mind sought to integrate the myriad articles of experience into a cohesive, unified, and easily manageable whole.

If only there were a crucifix somewhere in all this; anything cross-shaped. That would make it all so easy.

He gave up quickly, determining that his life had become nothing better than a dynamic koan, an alogical collection of disjoint incidents that really didn't mean anything at all—and shrugged, defeated, waiting for *satori*.

"Is it new?" He asked his wife, nodding at the dress. *Poor woman*, he thought. *Hasn't noticed the carcass on her Bauhaus*.

"I bought it mainly for the office," she said. "You know what style means there."

"It's a fetching outfit," he agreed.

"I'm glad you like it."

He meant that a dog might wear it to retrieve sticks.

"It ought to make quite an impression," Bernhard said. "I was flipping through *Vogue* this morning and I got the feeling they're quite in right now."

She seemed to be handling all this far too well, and he wondered if he was imaging things, after all. But a quick glance affirmed his first impression.

Body.

Brains.

Bauhaus.

Unconsciously, he began adjusting his body movement to emphasize the presence of the corpse. As his wife shuffled around their living room, Bernhard had begun humming "I Am Easily Assimilated" from *Candide*:

Reclassify

pigeons and camels

Pigeons can fly

Camels are mammals

There is a reason

for everything under the sun

There is a reason

for everything under the sun

"I really don't know why these things are important," his wife went on, "but, well, when in Rome..."

"Yes, yes," Bernhard nodded, a bit vigorously, exacerbating a headache that had been dwelling, since he got home, at the periphery of pain like serpents circling at the margins of Amyclae.

"Anything to get ahead," he continued, emphasizing "head" and nodding once again, this time purposefully, in the direction of his decerebrated self.

But his wife still took no notice. As he began to consciously realize what his unconscious was doing, he decided to play along, and tried to contrive various phatic forms that subtly used words with

an appropriate semantic connotation.

"You must try to keep a *stiff* upper lip."

"What's a *body* to do?"

"You shouldn't have to *couch* your terms."

It was then that his wife began speaking Japanese. This was unusual, as she had shown little propensity before as a polyglot. She spoke her mother tongue, certainly, and even quite articulately, at that, but he would not have assumed such familiarity with any of the main branches of the Altaic stem. For a moment he almost forgot about his dead self.

"When did you learn to speak Japanese?" he asked.

"*Nan no hanashi o shimashita ka?*"

"You sound convincing. It's very Geisha. Do we still have any Kurosawa on tape?" He remembered a Kunisada scroll showing various stages of *coitus* between a young woman and a Samurai.

"*Wakarimasen! Wakarimasen!*" His wife looked distressed, and Bernhard concluded that she had finally noticed the body.

"Yes," he agreed. "It's really rather distressing. Who do you think let him in? The landlord?"

"*Doshite—*" his wife began, then vanished.

Various pieces of furniture likewise disappeared. A lamp made its exit, leaving its light behind. Then a table, but the vase it had been supporting remained momentarily, eerily suspended in mid-air. Finally, the vase, too, melted away, yet the dried flowers within it steadfastly hung in a bouquet above the floor. Surprisingly, the Bauhaus retained its shape despite all.

Their apartment was on the third story of the building, and Bernhard had no

desire to test if it had the resolve of dried flowers. Anticipating the annihilation of the floor, he quickly got up and left.

But where to go?

Outside, the street was a riot of activity, but none of it human. Instead, he saw monkeys, all with oversized brains. Where there should have been automobiles were spinning circles enclosed by hexagons with the letter C at each apex, and each C had a letter H that was its satellite, carried on chariots consisting of the statements of Newton's three laws, in English, German, and Japanese. Then the hexagons became nests of snakes, all writhing and squirming, drawn into circles and eating their own tails.

When he looked up, he saw the formula:

$$n = \sin \alpha / \sin \beta$$

which he did not recognize, but which was Snell's Law governing refraction.

When he looked down, he saw four of Euclid's postulates, the fifth postulate coyly lurking as a shadow at the periphery of its predecessors.

In a daze he walked past axonometric projections of studied elegance and brutalist arcologies, dividing empty space and crying out, "The house as a shelter!" and "The house as a machine for living in!" The overt rejection of eclecticism and ornament, solitudinous breakers against a sea of flat, grey vectors, with arrowheads pointing to and from them.

Overhead, Lorentz attractors gathered, foretelling rain. He headed to the laboratory.

It was no easy task, that, without the visual cues that he had depended on and had taken for granted all his life. All had been replaced by formulae and deep,

primal concepts, some of which he recognized, few of which he understood. Worse, his internal map of the city had left him, replaced by the single integer 1, the result of decades of mathematical research in the early nineteenth century that culminated in Gauss's Theorem, which proved that no flat map could be made that was a perfectly accurate representation of the globe, for spheres, Gauss said, had "curvature = 1" while planes had "curvature = 0," and you could not perfectly map two surfaces of different curvature onto one another, whatever that meant.

Bernhard had stopped to ask directions many times, but the monkeys would not speak to him. He managed to flag down the conceptual locus known as impressionism, which had apparently made its way from the art museum, but it had proved to be quite rude, not that Bernhard was surprised, really; he had heard that about the French. Helpfully, there was a henry, the principal unit of inductance, close by to intervene and point him the right way. But in the distance, as he passed, he could hear it being assaulted by a particularly vicious Bézout's Lemma. The sounds of counter-valent hypotheses having it out is never pretty.

As it turned out, the laboratory was easy to identify. It had been a structure designed to be utterly consonant with its function, and so, even in this world of ambulatory abstraction, it had remained intact. But the security guard's station had been replaced by a single red word: *nomos*. It fled when Bernhard flashed his security pass.

Inside the building was another matter. While most of it was recognizable, certain features had been altered. Where there had been computers, there were now endless loops of magnetic tape,

read onto and read off of by a single pair of tapeheads. Where there had been washrooms, there were now pots of honey. Receptionists had been replaced by the letters QWERTY, and some by coffeemakers, and some were naked astride bulls, and at other places there was nothing at all. In the offices of scientists were now scores of monkeys, all randomly punching away at typewriters. Occasionally, one of the monkeys would shriek triumphantly then tear a sheet from its roller and add it to a large stack of similar objects. At least paperclips, Bernhard noted with relief, were still paperclips.

When he finally arrived at Dr. Neuekopf's office, he found that the professor had been waiting for him.

"Come in, come in," Neuekopf said. He was wearing a button on his lab coat that read, "Talk to me first about heredity."

"Thank you," Bernhard replied. "It's a relief to find another human being."

"Yes, yes; I suppose that it is. It's Riemann, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Bernhard Riemann."

"Now I remember. Test subject 616-026-B. I will be calling you simply 'B' in my paper."

"I'm sure that's very flattering. Does what's happening to me have something to do with your paper?"

"Mmm," Neuekopf nodded. "There's been a bit of an accident, it seems, and you, Bernhard, I am afraid, are a casualty of science."

"Oh, my," Bernhard replied. "My insurance doesn't cover that, does it?"

"Well, that depends; what did you do here at the laboratory?"

"I was a test subject, sir."

"A professional test subject?"

"Not at first. At first, I worked in advertising. But they told me there was

better money in R & D."

"I see. Well then, no, in answer to your question. Your policy won't cover you for this. How many experiments have you been involved in?"

"About a hundred."

"Then this was bound to happen. We take what precautions we can, but..." Neuekopf shrugged.

"And what happened to me..."

"An accident, as I said. I was experimenting with an electronic apparatus meant to induce telepathy—an unproved hypothesis—in its users. Give our sales boys an edge in the field, you see. But the untenability of my assumptions was apparently at odds with the reification potential of my machine and I provoked a, well, let us call it an *occurrence*."

"But what happened to me?"

"This is difficult to explain. Apparently, the only way the device could resolve the conflict between hypothetical formulation and actual phenomena was to promote the test subject—you—out of the phenomenal realm altogether and into the realm of pure hypothesis, where telepathy—unproven, did I mention that?—could exist.

"It's quite exciting, really, and you should not feel that your sacrifice to science has been in vain. I think what I am going to propose is a new fundamental particle, the *skepton*, constituted in all events, which is the quanta of disbelief. An event with a high skepton content is, I think, disregarded by an observer, filtered out based on some skepton interaction threshold; events with a high skepton charge cannot interact with lower skepton events and hence these are the ones that are filtered out. In your case, Bernhard, you received a very high dose of skepton radiation."

"I don't understand," Bernhard com-

plained. "I have radiation poisoning? Am I hallucinating? Please tell me how to make it stop."

"I said it was going to be difficult to explain. Right now, Bernhard, you are perceiving the universe in its most purely conceptual form. All the denizens of cogitation and discovery are your comrades, now. All that is normal and probable is alien to you; you simply cannot perceive things in that way. Think of it, Bernhard: there is only one truth, and all knowledge gathering, all science, merely a series of guesses. There are infinitely many such guesses possible, so that if we discover anything of the truth, the event is statistically rendered as highly improbable; what are the chances of picking the red marble from a jar of infinitely many white marbles, and only one red one? Simply put, Bernhard, what is least likely or least probable is what now constitutes your experience. I don't think the effect can be replicated either, unfortunately. It appears to be rather idiophagic, something unique to your biochemistry. You are quite alone here."

"But," Bernhard complained. "But if that explanation is true, then it is itself the least probable one, so is it the real explanation that I am experiencing right now or is it just the product of skepton irradiation? But then, but then, is the unlikelihood that I have just concluded about the improbability of the explanation itself contradicted by its own intrinsic improbability, what with it being the truth, and is it therefore untrue, making the skepton explanation true, meaning it is untrue, meaning..." He gave up. His head hurt. It was just this kind of reasoning that had turned him away from philosophy, from all kinds of thinking, in fact; what had driven him to a career in advertising.

"Nonetheless," Neuekopf said, after a long silence. "It is where you are at right now, so perhaps it is something you had better get used to."

"Wait," Bernhard objected. "What about you? How is it that I can interact with you?"

Neuekopf shrugged again.

"I'm a workaholic," he explained. "I really have no life apart from what I do. This is all that I am. Nothing to be abstracted."

"Then you at least have a place here. But what can I do? How can I make a living? How will I survive? Is there room for men in the world of ideas?"

"I don't know, Bernhard. I don't even know what passes for money in this world; maybe ideas, themselves."

Bernhard, slump-shouldered, left the laboratory. Outside, the Continuum Hypothesis and its negation strolled by, consequent in consequent, and Bernhard mourned for lost love. The Ptolemaic model of the universe, unable to account for the existence of 3C273, or any quasar, for that matter, crouched by the Platonic idealization of a curb, begging scraps of deductive rationalization from passing theorems. Strung out on its own impossible accuracy, addicted to *ad hoc*, it pined for the lost Greek schema that had been its golden age. Bernhard could smell arbitrariness on its breath, even from his distant vantage point, many units away.

Closer at hand gathered groups of groups, which had ironically formed themselves into rings around him. They pointed at him and muttered in complex, incomprehensible algebraic gibberish, before joining together in elegant isomorphisms. Freedom and responsibility laughed at him; Zarathustra gestured in fear and trembling from the saddle point of $x^3 + y^3 - 3x - 12y + 20$.

Bernhard saw manifolds and bundles and cohomologies. He saw strings and tilings and more than a few unified field theories. Over there—Existentialism was arguing with Narcissus, and even Narcissus looked like he could get ugly. An empty space loomed and then moved on, and Bernhard realized that he had finally found religion.

He remembered the song he had been singing earlier, but now it was $\exists X \ni X \in \{\text{worlds}\} \wedge \neg \exists Y \in \{\text{worlds}\} \ni Y > X$:

$$\{\text{pigeons}\} \cap \{\text{camels}\} = \emptyset$$

$$\{\text{pigeons}\} \subset \{\text{avians}\}$$

$$\{\text{camels}\} \subset \{\text{mammals}\}$$

$$\forall X < \text{CNO-cycle} \exists r \in \{\text{reasons}\}$$

$$\forall X < \text{CNO-cycle} \exists r \in \{\text{reasons}\}$$

Monads flocked beneath Snell's Law.

There were so many things he was surprised he could identify.

Finally, *finally*, he knew what slitheytoves looked like. And that little tantric two-step they were doing must be gyring and gimbling. He thought he might even be able to manage it himself, even though he lacked the necessary flagella and pseudopodia. And those things in the background—those must be borogoves. He had to agree that they were pretty mimsy. They were certainly the mimsiest borogoves that he had ever seen.

So many things—yes, and so many more he had no names for, but this did not trouble him. Even Adam had his bad days, he supposed.

No, what troubled him was the growing realization that he had been trained for a life that was as far from this as was conceivable. The creative, the brilliant, the abstract—all these things had been squashed from him by the normative constraints of the mundane world. He

was without ideas, without imagination; he had no currency for this world.

He recalled the Ptolemaic model of the universe: Poverty would be his lot, too.

He pondered the incomprehensible hypnagogic wilderness about him for

quite some time, and began to weep. He wondered at a world which would disappoint him so. Why bother with a world at all, if not as a stage for regularity and reason?

Life, he concluded, was an affront to logic. •

Writer and vertebrate ERIK JON SPIGEL has an MA in Japanese Literature from the University of Toronto, and is currently residing in Japan. His body is 80% water, plus or minus a few pounds of cheap chemicals and a couple of rare earth elements. His other interests include classical music, cooking (he claims that caffeine is a food group), and vacuum tubes. In addition to writing fiction, poetry, and songs (he was a terribly unsuccessful street busker in the mid-eighties), he is also planning a number of literary translations and analyses of Japanese works.

ILLUSTRATOR: ROBERT BOERBOOM lives in Brantford, Ont. He recently moved his easel and the rest of his operation from his home to a new studio. He and painter Wayne Draper have a show of combined works opening in May in a London, Ont. gallery. He is also displaying at various locations in Brantford.



Dog Days

Leslie Gadallah

illustrated by Domenic Pirone

The com link pings away and refuses to stop.

Sunlight stabs through a gap in the drapes in the room behind my office where I live. Sharp rays find the bed, prise tears from bloodshot eyes and rouse the monster drum that lurks within my brain. They say the new alcohol substitutes have no harmful side effects. They lie.

Groaning, I switch the video off and hit the receive button on the bedside set.

"Louis Laroche Confidential Investigations," I croak.

Tracy Malone's lovely face appears onscreen. She looks upset, maybe a little frightened. Tracy is a special lady and she doesn't spook easily. I come all the way to consciousness.

"Can you come over?"

"Sure." Like I could ever refuse her. "What's wrong?"

"Somebody broke into the clinic. They trashed everything." Pause. "I need a shoulder to cry on." Pause. "I'm missing a couple of patients. And I think they took the dog."

I grab some clothes, make a quick pass at washing my face and hie myself over to Willow Street.

The Willow Street Veterinary Clinic is a wreck—glass all over the street, animal patients complaining; a couple of neighbors on the sidewalk are holding their elbows and rubbernecking but not doing much to help.

Both hands full of computer discs, Tracy meets me at the door and wraps her arms around me without letting go of any of her precious records. "Just hang onto me for a minute. I feel violated and very insecure."

I am happy to oblige. Stepping carefully over scattered things, I hold her close, enjoying the girl-body next to mine. "Hey, if I knew it would have this effect, I would have wrecked the place myself."

She scowls. "Not funny."

"Sorry." I am merely trying to lighten up the scene. Over her shoulder, I see her

dour assistant George frowning from the wobbly top of a chair standing on a table. He returns to trying persuade a cat to come down from the top of a cabinet. Kitty regards him suspiciously. The doors of the cabinet are broken and half the boxes, jars and mean-looking steel contraptions from inside are lying on the floor.

Tracy leans back to look up at me. "Mrs. Van Klemp's hedgehog is missing. She'll probably sue my ass off." Proto-tears gleam in her eyes. "And the dog. I haven't seen any sign of him. It's not like him to just take off."

The dog has no name because we never found one he would accept.

He arrived muddy and bleeding on my doorstep about two months previously, a day or so after the hullabaloo about the animal rights bozos breaking into a genetics lab at the University and letting all the experiments loose into the city streets. Tracy was the nearest vet I could find in the book. She clued me into the fact that this was not your average big yellow mongrel down on his luck. After she bound his wounds and tended his torn feet, she got out a gizmo that read the microchip embedded under the fold of skin between his shoulder blades, then consulted a list.

"This animal is part of a cross genetics experiment. Some of its DNA is human."

Well, the truth is, the dog looks like a damn dog and not a bit like a human being. But I had the impression he knew what we were taking about, and didn't like the way the conversation was going.

"Do we have to give it back?" I wondered. The dog's tail drooped.

"We should. Otherwise, it's theft." The dog whimpered.

"I don't want to."

"Me neither. I—ah—really don't approve of that sort of thing, but the animal is not to blame. There's no reason why it should suffer." She got some equipment, applied a local anesthetic, made a small incision, and extracted a ROM-chip package not much bigger than a well-fed flea. The dog waved his tail and licked her hand. "It knows," she said, amazed.

"So do I," I said, already smitten. "I'd like to take you to dinner as a small token in celebration of freedom."

She hesitated all of ten seconds. It was the beginning of the first friendship I have taken serious interest in for a very long time. It's a weird, arm's length relationship, because each of us is being extravagantly careful not to push the other too fast. Tracy's defensive of her independence, having finally shook loose from a smothering family, and I've been pretty antsy ever since ex-wife Amy took off in mid-gasp as it were, leaving me no hope of seeing my one and only offspring who might have been sired by a glass vial for all he'll ever know.

In any case, the dog stayed. We tried any number of names on him, all of which were greeted with looks of canine incredulity, disgust or pain. So we call him "the dog," which seems to suit everybody.

Back in the present, Tracy collects herself and says, "Come and see this." She leads me into her normally neat little office. Drawers and cabinets are open. Everything is on the floor. The door of the small wall-safe gapes.

"What was in there?" I inspect, getting close but not touching, seeking signs of force around the lock.

"Mostly papers. A hundred dollars or so in cash. A small supply of narcotics." She points to the stain on the floor, dark

on the carpet, deep red where it splashed across jumbled pages. "All together, there wasn't enough to tempt a thief." She watches me to see how I respond as she says, "I didn't call the police. I didn't want to tell them about the dog."

"Is this the dog's blood?"

"It's human. A-positive. Not mine, and not George's."

So whose? "Doll, I do not think we can keep this a secret. The neighbors have gathered. Cops can do a genetic map, maybe match it to some malefactor whose DNA pattern is on file, and hell, dogs and cats in a vet's office is normal."

Tracy reluctantly accepts the rationale and dials the local station. While she awaits our fearless crime-fighters, I make the rounds of the neighborhood, hoping to find someone who has seen the dog. By mid-afternoon, I wind up at Jerry's Place, discouraged and thirsty.

Jerry himself is behind the bar. He hasn't seen the dog either but he has heard about the break-in and looks appropriately sympathetic, but then, he has the face of a depressed beagle at the best of times. "How's Tracy?" he asks.

Wonderful, I could say. The best thing that ever happened to me. But this is not what he means. "She's cool." I quaff a few beers (pseudo-beers, and they are not the same) and call the clinic. There's no answer.

Then I am not cool. Deep inside where my instincts live, I don't like this. I call home. No message is waiting, and no one answers at Tracy's place, either. I wall up an urge to worry behind bricks of fact like how Tracy is all grown up, sensible, capable, smart, and has been on her own for a while.

So, instead of sitting around Jerry's watching my blood pressure rise, I bus

it over to the University to ask a few questions I been meaning to ask since the dog showed up, but never got around to. They suddenly seem urgent.

Once upon a time—better, simpler days—all an investigator needed to do business was a big gun and an attitude. No more. Nowadays you need a whole collection of boffins, sharks, gurus and eggheads on call, just to keep up.

At the U, I talk to geneticist Doctor Beatrice McCrea, a fine looking woman hiding behind horn-rims and a lab coat. "Those dogs," she says, referring to the earlier break-in, "were literally organ factories. Genes for an individual human's tissue antigens are spliced into large-breed dog embryos. Once grown, the animals would be able supply the gene donor with organs as needed, a heart, perhaps, or a kidney, thus avoiding the rejection problem. Once past the pilot stage, we planned to have the gene donor raise and care for his own dog so there would be no pressure on public funds."

"I thought pigs were used for that sort of thing."

"They make awful house guests."

"Good point."

"Anyway, the project has been cancelled, so it doesn't matter."

"Why?"

"The animal rights people. And money. Only the very rich could afford the finished technology so it's hard to justify spending tax dollars on the research."

"Oh." Not much wiser, I go back to the office. The night has grown thick and dark beyond the windows. I call Tracy again, but no joy. Serious worry, not put down by platitudes. I call George. He looks rumpled. He sounds drowsy. "She went home at five. Maybe she's asleep. It was a hard day."

Maybe.

I have a couple of cases pending—a missing daughter not so much missing as escaping a bullying mother, and I have to decide what to tell whom; a factory owner who thinks his employees are stealing his robot software. But it's hard to work. I give it up and putter a bit, dust a few things, make a little dinner and nibble at it, call Tracy's place and leave a third message, but I can't relax. Call it hunch, intuition, telepathy, clairvoyance, a communion of spirits or any New Age gobbledygook you like, but I know things are not right. When I can't stand it any more, I drive my aging three-wheel town car across the city to look for myself, fuel rations be damned. If I wake her and she's pissed, that's okay.

The brightly lit streets are quiet, a few girls on the corners, a few watchful hand-dlers in the shadows nearby, and almost no trade. Honest folk barricade themselves into their homes after dark. The night life feeds on itself; it grows thin and hungry.

Tracy lives downtown in one of the spanking new habitats that combine five hundred or so suites with commercial and recreation space to become what is supposed to be a complete, self-contained community where people can live, work, buy their groceries, wash their clothes and entertain themselves without ever leaving the building. Bureaucrats tell us habitats will revitalize the city center, which has been wasting away since people started doing business in cyberspace. We'll see.

They're ugly, if nothing else. Tracy's building is lemon yellow with a plastic sheen and smell, small dark windows and door frames that look like they were stamped into the material when it was still soft from molding, a toy building in everything but size. It rises thirty-five sto-

ries into the air and covers the whole block. The security system refuses to admit non-residents after the ground floor shops have closed, but my friend Dancer showed me how to bypass habitats' mass-produced xenophobia. Holes had to be built into the system after all, to admit cops and firefighters, tax-collectors and what have you.

The scuff-resistant Hi-D doors on the twenty-first floor are all dark muddy green, set into a featureless beige wall, secured by tamper-proof locks and identified with pseudo-brass numbers. I try the bell. There's no answer. So once more I deploy my handy-dandy self-programming, highly illegal, universal keycard and in less than a minute, I'm in.

Tracy is not.

The apartment is quiet and dark, the only light the backwash from the vid wall in art mode, a repetitive slosh of waves against rocks. Her jacket is lying over the back of a chair. Dirty dishes litter the kitchen and the bed is unmade, but she's an indifferent housekeeper, so it's hard to say if this is significant.

The sense of wrongness whispering in the back of my mind becomes a determined shout. The com unit is blinking away. I poke the play button and listen to the sound of my own voice. But there is a fourth message, no video, the voice rough and cold, like rocks grating together. "Laroche, we need to talk. 133 Main St. Tomorrow noon. Bring the dog."

The dog?

Who knows where the dog is?

But I know that voice. I know Tracy is in trouble. I don't know what I'm going to do about it. There is a moment of blind panic. I hate that in clients—rabbit guts in the face of danger. I like it even less in me.

•
Cops always say, "Leave the bad guys to us. Mere citizens should not endanger themselves. We know what to do and how to do it."

Unfortunately, the cops of the Midtown Station are not unduly excited about a minor break-in. They are busy putting the fear of God into a half dozen juvies and sleuthing out the reason why the doughnut shop missed the coffee break delivery. "It takes awhile to do a gene map and compare it with the million or so we have on file," Police Detective Miriam Jones grumbles when she sees me coming.

I explain my new worry. Jones looks at me in exasperation.

"Give me a break, Laroche. It's only half past bloody midnight. Eight hours does not a missing person make. She could be just sleeping over with a friend." She holds up a weary hand to stave off my argument. "As far as this goes," she waves dismissively at the disc from Tracy's com unit lying on her desk, "it doesn't sound threatening to me. You're getting paranoid. I don't care who you think it is."

I leave. Insistence by mere citizens only makes cops cranky. Proceed to Plan B.

George lives in an aging walkup secured by metal keys. After I lean on the buzzer quite a long time, he deigns to answer the intercom. Much talking is required to get him to let me in. I finally threaten to wake everyone in the building and tell them all that it's his fault. Then he says, "All right. Come up."

The only light in George's place is in the kitchen, a small fluorescent over the stove. He is there, fiddling with a coffee dispenser. A shadowy female presence fades down a dark hallway, leaving only

vibrations in the air to register disapproval. There are movements deep inside the apartment, vaguely sensed, like whispers in a noisy room.

We sit in the dim, cold light at a small Arborite table. As such things go, George's dispenser prepares a decent brew. I outline my plan. He doesn't look at me, just shakes his head when I'm done. "You're out of your mind, Laroche. She was perfectly fine at five o'clock. You're jumping to conclusions."

"Suppose. It will cost you a trip to the animal shelter in the morning."

"Actually—"

"I'll pay the pound fees. I just need you to arrive promptly at twelve fifteen. If it's nothing, it's nothing. No harm done. Okay?"

"You think Bruno Marcuso? The guy that's always on the news with the drugs and stuff?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

I shrug. It's a question that has been bothering me, too.

George finally looks at me. He is not a man of action; anxiety is already tearing at his stomach lining, giving his complexion a faintly greenish cast.

"What if they know?"

"Then we're screwed, my man."

I can almost see his brain working overtime trying to determine which is the more hazardous, my scheme or my outrage, and where his duty lies, and what he will do for a living if anything bad happens to Tracy. Maybe he even feels a little genuine concern. Finally he mumbles, "Okay."

I take it on faith his courage will hold out until morning. The truth is, I know very little about George. But I have more stops to make.

So I go back in the city center, first to the office to pick up some things, then

across the park to visit Dancer and Roach, friends from an old case.

Dancer answers the door right away, smiles and lets me in. Roach yells hello from the kitchen. Whatever he's cooking smells wonderful.

"So, you need your fuel ration card adjusted again?" Dancer asks. He is a whiz in matters digital.

"It would be nice, but mainly, I want a nice, meaningless chip that looks like this. And I'd like to know what the hell's on this one that would be worth kidnapping someone for." Because it has finally occurred to me even a burglar with a 7-watt mind does not break into a safe to look for a dog.

Dancer leads the way to his place of business.

The apartment is spacious, with two bedrooms, one of which actually has a bed. The other is occupied with benches and desks, a pigeonhole cupboard, and an incredible assortment of electronic widgets, spools of wire, computer guts, things that flash, beep, draw graphs, or present gyrating circles on a screen. There are jars and boxes, and tools, and circuit diagrams pasted to the walls.

Dancer drops my chip into a little plastic box, closes the lid and plugs something into the side. Further down the bench, a monitor lights up.

"Hmm." Dancer taps the screen with a chewed off fingernail, indicating a group of numbers that have appeared there. "That's standard animal ID. But the rest of this stuff doesn't belong. That's a site address. The University, I think. I'm guessing the rest is user ID and passwords. Want to try?"

"Yeah, I do."

So, in the fullness of time I find myself paging through Dr. McCrea's project notes. Her team had processed about a hundred animals. The dog's picture is

there, and with it is the name of the gene donor: Cosmo Perilli. A distant bell—I have heard this name before.

We look up Cosmo Perilli in *Who's Who* on CD-ROM, and cast around public electronic records for signs of who or what, and why the name sticks in my mind, but we don't find him in the easy places. Fact is, I'm too tired and tense to see straight. Dancer sends me home. He promises to keep on looking.

By the time I get there, a little color is creeping into the muddy sky above the city. My eyes feel like stones in a sand pile, and my brain is decidedly numb. Hoping for an hour's sleep to regenerate the nerves and oil the reflexes, I stumble up the stairs to my bed.

I don't see him until it's almost too late. Windmilling, I crash into the door and curse him roundly. The dog gets up, stretches, yawns and faces the door with his tail waving gently, waiting for me to let him in. "Where the hell were you?" I rant but relief takes the edge off and I'm scratching his ear and checking him for damage at the same time.

"Now if you just knew where Tracy is."

He frowns in doggy puzzlement. Of course, he doesn't know his best bud is missing. I lay it out for him while I get ready for bed. He listens carefully, following close to catch every word.

I think about calling George and telling him to skip the pound, but decide against it. Plan B still seems the best way to go. If the bad guys lay their hands on the dog, maybe I'll have nothing to bargain with. I go to bed and try not to think about Tracy, but I can't help worrying. Bruno Marcuso and I have met before. The last time we bumped noses, we both got hurt. He lost a couple of loyal soldiers to the drug squad, and I got a bullet hole in my side. My scars'll be there

for life. Bruno probably got new help before the end of the week.

In no time it's bloody morning.

I take the dog in the car with me, explaining en route what I want him to do. "It's important," I tell him. "I'm depending on you." He watches my face and listens with ears cocked. His tail thumps dust out of the seat, but there's no way to know if he understands.

133 Main is a deserted store front with a cracked window and a gaping front door. I park the car across the street. The dog lies down on the floor to wait, as instructed. I enter a shop advertising "XXX-Adult Holovid—ALL NEW—private showings" where I manage to convince the proprietor that I am interested in neither 3-D pornography nor expensive designer drugs. Thereafter, for a few bucks, he is willing to leave me alone while I stare out through the bars on his dirty front window.

I see nothing, which is about what I expected. Then, hard on noon, there is a hint of movement behind the broken glass. I give them ten minutes to stew, then jog over. At the door a commercial body—lots of biceps, no brains—pats me down with a thoroughness that suggests improbable interests. Then we go in.

We are met by a higher ranking thug, who is not in the front lines, we might assume, because of a serious limp. "A-positive?" I ask; surprisingly, he does not deign to answer. Marcuso himself is not in evidence, of course. We do the "where's the dog, where's the girl" bit and I am led to a back room. Tracy is there, tied to a chair, biting her lip, with another bad guy standing guard.

"I was hoping you wouldn't come," she says bravely.

A casual glance doesn't reveal any

serious damage. Which means exactly zip. I ignore her, not wanting the bad guys to know how much seeing her like this hurts, how high the stakes really are. "So where's the pooch?" King Thug asks. Original dialogue is not what he's good at.

"Coming."

George's timing is perfect, and if you didn't know the dog, the yellow mongrel he is leading could easily be the one. George is pale enough to write home on, but hanging together better than I expected.

King Thug is nervously watching George's hold on the lead as he whips out a chip-reading gizmo like Tracy's and passes it over the animal's back. Needless to say, nothing happens. He does it again, just to be sure, then looks up at me. "What're you tryin' to pull, Laroche?"

I shrug, palms up. "What ever do you mean?" He shows me the little window on the gizmo, which should have a bunch of numbers showing, but actually has nothing. I don't let on I have a clue.

King Thug turns on George. "Where's the chip?" Like George would know. George cringes and gets smaller.

I step in before George actually dies of apoplexy or blurts out vital information. "What's with chips? You asked for a dog. You got a dog. A deal's a deal." Hey man, I can bandy clichés with the best of them.

King Thug looks at me like he's got no hope of making my leaden wit comprehend the problem. "God, you're dumb. No chip, no hostage. Period."

"I was afraid you might say that." I fish a wee baggie from my shirt pocket with the bakelite package nestled in the corner. I hold it up. King Thug smiles and holds out his hand. I hold the baggie out of reach, but just then I get a hard jab from behind. It's Muscles, with a

gun. I let him take the baggie.

So there we are, face to face with the big flaw in my plan, the one I couldn't see any way around other than abandoning Tracy to the bad guys' tender mercies.

"I left a note for Detective Jones explaining the situation, which she may find significant if anyone turns up dead," I tell them. It happens to be true, but this is going to be cold comfort at best. Where the hell is the dog?

King Thug shrugs, unconcerned. I rack my sorry brain for an escape plan. Nothing. I feel a bit like a mouse in cat heaven.

Finally. There is a growl and a scrabble behind me and Muscles crashes into me from behind, almost knocking me off my feet. I stagger into George. The gun goes off as it hits the floor, a hell of a roar. I am amazed to be undamaged. Startled, George drops the pound mutt's lead and that dog lights out for the only escape he can see, the open door to the back room. He arrives in the doorway just as the guard is rushing out and they collide. A flash of yellow fur whips by me and attaches to King Thug who screams and beats at it. "Get it away from me. Get it away from me."

I grab Muscles' cannon and back up until I can more or less cover the room.

"Everybody," I shout to get their attention. The dog lets go of the King, who is shaking like a two-dollar wheel, and parks himself beside me, head low, hackles raised. "Change of plan. George, get Tracy." He does. Brave lad.

The pound pooch has vanished from the scene. I wish him well.

When we're all together, we back across the street to the car and all four of us pile in, a damned tight fit, and one of us has dog breath. The hired muscle sticks his head out of 133, so I fire a

round into the wall beside him. It makes an impressive hole in the plaster.

A couple of blocks down, I pull into a side street and stop. We all get out, breathe deeply, and assure ourselves each other is all right. There's a certain amount of tearful hugging and happy tail wagging.

"I was scared," George says, understatement that makes us laugh. Sirens whoop in the distance. All the shooting has attracted attention.

Tracy sits down on the curb. She rubs a hand over her face and looks out into the middle of nowhere. She is starting to shake. "I'm glad that's over."

I shuck my jacket and put it over her shoulders. "It's not over." She looks at me like I just smacked her grandmother. I hate spoiling the party. "Marcuso hasn't got what he wants. He'll be back."

"What does he want?"

"What people like him always want—money and power. But selling sin doesn't cut it the way it used to. People have got smart, or they've got scared. But something close to immortality—there's a commodity with real market value."

"No damn way, Laroche," Tracy says later when she's feeling all tough and strong again. It's always a bad sign when she forgets my first name. "I've got work to do, patients to look after." My sweet lady is maybe fifty-three kilos on a bad day, and as easy to move as a mountain.

Obviously, I am not going to get her to a safe place. I try for a minor concession. "At least keep the dog with you."

"I'll keep the dog with me."

Back in my office, I call Policeperson Jones and ask her if she can keep an eye on the Willow Street clinic.

"Okay," she says.

"Okay?" I was expecting argument.

"We've identified your blood sample," she says.

"Let me guess—a known felon associated with some of Marcuso's less lawful business ventures."

"Damn it, Laroche, I hate it when you do that."

Roach is the guy who finally answered the Cosmo question, digging in the midden heap of miscellaneous information he keeps in his brain which he searches by sitting stone-faced in the middle of a dark room for as long as it takes. I use a public terminal to access the number he gives me. Marcuso's face matches the gravelly voice and the first thing he wants to know is, "Who gave you this number?"

It is a question I do not care to answer. "Cosmo Perilli, I presume?"

"You're beginning to annoy me, Laroche."

"I want to deal."

"Yeah?" He looks sceptical. "Why?"

"First, I don't want to be looking over my shoulder for one of your shooters for the rest of my life."

"I think you're finally smartening up. Second?"

"The gene splicing technology should be used. Honestly, you're not my first choice of vendors, but better than it sitting in a University vault for a hundred years. And hey, given the chance to make an honest billion or two, maybe you'll lay off the rough stuff. My contribution to crime reduction."

"You're still a smart ass. So?"

"What I'm going to do is give you a user ID and a password for a computer at the University. That will give you access to the data and procedures for the gene splicing technology. Anything else you need, scientists and stuff, you can buy. I figure you can afford it. In ex-

change you agree to leave me and mine alone. Okay?"

"I get the dog."

"Nope."

"So, forget it." He has a smile that could sour honey. "Maybe I'll send a couple of guys over to see if they can beat it out of you."

"Maybe they could. On the other hand, once you have the info, why not just prepare another dog?"

Marcuso chews this over for a couple of long seconds. He doesn't have a lot of formal schooling, but he's not dumb. "Okay, you've got a deal."

I wait until I get home and break out some totally illegal real, genuine alcohol before I phone Miriam Jones. The bootleg whisky, aged at least fifteen minutes, burns in the throat and makes my voice husky. Detective Jones chooses not to notice. "Real soon now, some bad people are going to break into a computer at the University. I'll give you the codes and filenames. If you alert the data cops—"

"Electronic offenses unit."

"—they should be able to catch the bad guys in the act."

"How come you're so nice to me?"

"A citizen's duty, ma'am."

"The hell you say." She signs off just as the dog pads in to bump me with his nose.

Tracy is right behind. "Is it dinner time yet?"

"Close. I've got the making of a killer stir-fry in the kitchen." We repair to the back to commence preparations.

She gets the wine from the fridge, pours, and holds the glass so I can get a sip while stirring chicken in the wok. "I still can't believe the University dropped such a profitable line of research. Why would they do that?"

I chop a little ginger and throw it in

with the meat. The dog comes in to sniff and listen. "I don't think they ever did." I add water chestnuts, green onions, red peppers and a double handful of bean sprouts to the wok. "A convenient public lie to divert the animal rights people, who have an aversion to people raising dogs only to cut bits out of them in times of need." A minced clove of garlic and two shakes of soy sauce and it's done. The rice is ready.

"That's gross," Tracy says, about the dog business, I presume.

"Whoever works the bugs out to the

point of getting approval from Health and Welfare can pretty well name his own price for the technique. I guess Marcuso *et al.* wouldn't bother with officialdom if they controlled the technology, but if our public defenders are on the ball, that shouldn't happen." I prepare three plates and put one on the floor for the dog.

"This is excellent." About the food, I presume. She chews a minute, swallows, then smiles. "I'm a total sucker for a man who can cook."

This is good. •

LESLIE GADALLAH was a practicing chemist and wrote popular science before turning to science fiction. The author of three SF novels, she lives with her family on an acreage near Spruce Grove.

ILLUSTRATOR: This is DOMENIC PIRONE's fourth illustration for *ON SPEC*. He has been working for other people too, and has been in group exhibitions in Toronto.

Estonian Witches

Sandra Kasturi

Estonian witches ride on canister vacs
it's hard for them to straddle those upright Hoovers
and brooms are just too old-fashioned
although I suppose some cling to tradition

They have nice homes too
no damp caves
or glass hills that'll blind you on the ride home
and no sugardy-candy cottages in the Schwarzwald
like those hypoglycemic German witches live in
and that weird house on chicken legs
in the freezing cold forest
that old mortar-and-pestle-riding Russian witch is partial to
well you can just forget it
Estonian witches like comfort

continues...

Mind you it was different before the war
then all they did was sit around knitting spells
into fuzzy looking odd smelling witch-balls
to throw after a wayward daughter
when she runs off with some high-strung anemic prince
invariably falling off a bridge into the river
and getting turned into a water-lily for her trouble
a lot of work for nothing really though
since the prince always goes whinging
to some hoity-toity Finnish sorcerer
and gets the witch's daughter changed back
a little soggy to be sure
but he takes her to the palace with him anyway
and then how's a self-respecting witch to hold her head up

That's why Estonian witches own condos in Florida nowadays
and visit the old country only every other summer
(they let their daughters keep the house in Toronto
where they can shack up with whomever they please
prince or not)
let's face it
it's a lot easier getting a witch license in a developed country •

ON Writing:

Seek and Destroy!

Robert J. Sawyer

Many writers have tried electronic style checkers, such as Grammatik or Correct Grammar, which are sold either as stand-alone utilities or are included as components of word-processing programs. And most who have tried them have given up on them: their advice is more often wrong than right, and the "errors" they perceive often aren't errors at all.

Still, the idea of getting help with revisions from your computer is appealing. Fortunately, you already have all the tools you need: they're standard features of your word-processing program. Most useful of all is your word processor's "search," "find," or "locate" function.

Whenever I finish a story or novel, I start a seek-and-destroy run for the word "very." It's almost never necessary, and can usually be eliminated: "the alien was very menacing" reads just as effectively as "the alien was menacing."

A few other good search-and-replace candidates: "utilize" should almost always be replaced with "use," "fro" is almost certainly a typo for "for," "in order to" should be changed to just "to," and "the fact that" can be replaced with just "that."

Next, seek out adjectives and adverbs. The easiest way to do that is with a search for "ly" followed by a space. If you needed an adjective or adverb to modify another word, perhaps you didn't choose the right word to begin with. For instance, if your "ly" search turns up "really large," substitute "huge" or "gigantic." If you've found "pounding loudly" substitute the more vigorous "thundering."

Next, track down anything you overuse. Me, I tend to employ too many em-dashes and semicolons. I could search for each occurrence and review it in context, but I

prefer instead to do a global search for those punctuation marks, replacing them with a highlighted version (depending on your word processor and display, you could replace them with italicized versions that show up as inverse video, or boldface versions that show up in a different intensity, or, if you work in a graphics-mode program, select a different color before each one, and then return to black afterwards). I then scroll through my document, and can see where I have too many of them close together. Afterwards, I just reverse the process, doing a global search-and-replace to turn the ones I've left intact back into their normal print attributes.

Also worth hunting down are exclamation marks. One can exclaim only short words or phrases, such as "Drat!" or "My God!" (Try to exclaim, "But it turned out that the alien planet they were on was really Earth!" It can't be done, and writing it that way just makes you seem histrionic.) And if you find two or more exclamation marks in a row—Holy cow!!!—eliminate all but one of them.

One thing you should *not* track down, though, is the word "said." Almost all of your speech tags *should* be of the form "he said" or "she said." Only beginners constantly look for alternatives to the serviceable, invisible "said." (For all his virtues, Stanley G. Weinbaum was a beginner when he wrote his classic 1934 story "A Martian Odyssey," which has a character named Putz ejaculating his lines...)

Finally, do a search-and-replace to check your profanity, and make sure it's appropriate for your market. The "Drat!" and "My God!" I used above are okay for a column like this, but if you're writing real adults in real situations, you may want something harsher. (On the other

hand, in polishing my novel *Starplex*, I realized that it would likely appeal to teenagers as well as the adults I had in mind when I wrote it, so I tracked down all the scatological and copulatory profanity, and substituted milder terms.)

What else can your computer do to help you? Plenty. Most writers notice during proofreading if they've started two consecutive sentences the same way. But it's also bad form to start two consecutive paragraphs the same way, and that's harder to spot. Again, your computer can come to your rescue. Set your right-margin to the highest value your program allows (and, if you're using a non-graphical program, select the smallest point-size for your text that you can), then reformat the document. You'll end up with almost all of your paragraphs as single long lines, scrolling off the right-hand side of the screen. You can then compare how each paragraph begins. Doing that on the file containing this article would have made it obvious that two consecutive paragraphs above start with "Next." If you didn't notice that yourself, this technique is for you.

Of course you know you should use your spell checker, but—please!—learn to *trust* it. If it tells you that a word in your manuscript is spelled incorrectly, it probably is. If the spell checker doesn't offer an alternative, then look it up in a dictionary. I was amazed recently to see a manuscript from an author who has ten books in print in which "congratulations" was consistently misspelled "congradulations." Doubtless years ago, the first time her spell checker had flagged the error, she'd assumed her spelling was correct and the database lacked the word, so she added the incorrect form to her personal dictionary.

One thing your word processor can't

do for you is properly count the words in your manuscript. The standard at most publications is to use "printers' rule," which counts every 65-stroke manuscript line as ten words, regardless of whether the line happens to be full (after all, the word count is supposed to give the production editor an idea of how much space the piece will take up in the publication). Actual grammatical word counts usually are ten to twenty percent below the value given by "printers' rule." If you can set an infinite or zero page length in your word processor, then the line count multiplied by ten will give you the word count according to printers' rule; otherwise, multiply the number of lines per page by the number

of whole pages, add the number of lines on the partially full first and last pages, then multiply by ten.

Still, your computer's word count may be your most important motivator. The best way to make it as a writer is to set yourself a daily target figure and not stop working until you've reached it (my own is 2,000 words; for most full-time writers, the target is between 1,000 and 2,500). Every few minutes, I do a word count to see how much more work I have to do until I can knock off for the day—which, having now reached that figure, is precisely what I'm going to do right now. But don't you quit writing today until you've reached *your* own word-count goal... •

ROBERT J. SAWYER's *The Terminal Experiment* won the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America's Nebula Award for Best Novel of 1995, and is a current finalist for the Hugo Award. Rob's new novel, *Starplex*, is currently being serialized in *Analog*. You can meet him at ConVersion in Calgary (July 19-21), Falcon in Halifax (September 14), and at Toronto's Bakka SF Bookstore during "The Word on the Street" festival (September 29). Visit his World Wide Web home page at:

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- JUNE 7-9 – AD ASTRA 16

Days Inn Airport, Mississauga. GoH: David Hartwell. Memb: \$35 at the door. Info: P.O. Box 7276, Station A, Toronto ON, M5W 1X9.

- JUNE 28-30 – KINGCON 96

Hotel Courtney Bay, St John NB. Info: (506) 652-KING.

- JULY 19-21 – CONVERSION XIII/
CANVENTION 1996

Glenmore Inn, Calgary. GoH: C.J. Cherryh. TM: Mel Gilden. Memb: \$40 at the door. Info: P.O. Box 1088, Station M, Calgary AB, T2P 2K9.

- AUG 2-4 – TORONTO TREK 10

Regal Constellation Hotel, Toronto. GoH: Robert Picardo. Info: Suite 0116, Box 187, 65 Front St West, Toronto ON, M5J 1E6 or http://freenet.buffalo.edu/~startrek/toronto_trek.html

- SEPT 14 – FALCON 1996

Lord Nelson Hotel, Halifax. GoH: Robert J. Sawyer; Fan GoH: Michael Galant; Art GoHs: Peter Francis, Luisa Nadalini. Memb: \$12. Info: PO Box 36123, Halifax NS, B3J 3S9 or email gtucker@fox.nstn.ns.ca

- SEPT 28-29 – OURCON

Assiniboine Gordon Inn on the Park, Winnipeg. Celebrates *Star Trek's* 30th Anniversary. Memb: \$25 to Sept 1/96, \$30 at the door. Info: PO Box 67001, RPO Maples, Winnipeg MB, R2P 2T3. Send details of Canadian conventions and/or author reading dates at least 5 months in advance: Box 4727, Edmon-

ton AB, T6E 5G6). Information here is courtesy of *CONTRACT*, the Canadian convention newsletter: 321 Portage Ave, Winnipeg MB, R3B 2B9 (subscriptions \$7 / 6 issues). Send your convention info directly to them, as well.

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Theme: Youth Writing & Art – Nicole Luiken, Peter Tupper, Keynyn Brysse, Cory Doctorow, Rhonda Whittaker, Christine Gertz, Cairo & X, Jeb Gaudet, Marissa Kochanski, & Monica Hughes. Cover: Deven Kumar.
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J.R. Martel, Cheryl Merkel, Preston Hapon, Jason Kapalka, Linda Smith, Catherine Girczyc, Robert Baillie, Sean Stewart (excerpt from *Nobody's Son*), Tim Hammell. Cover: Marc Holmes.
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Theme: Over the Edge – Erik Jon Spigel, M.A.C. Farrant, Lyle Weis, Robert Boyczuk, Jason Kapalka, John Skaife, Michael Hetherington, Dirk L. Schaeffer, Eileen Kernaghan, Tim Hammell. Cover: Kenneth Scott.
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Leslie Gadallah, Jason Kapalka, Dan Knight, Bruce Byfield, Alison Baird, Robert Boyczuk, Keith Scott, Preston Hapon, Rand Nicholson, David Nickle & Karl Schroeder. Cover: Robert Boerboom.
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Derryl Murphy, Catherine MacLeod, T. Robert Szekely, Robert Boyczuk, Ivan Dorin, Luke O'Grady, M.A.C. Farrant, A.R. King, Wesley Herbert, Dave Duncan (excerpt from *The Stricken Field*). Cover: Robert Pasternak.
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Theme: Hard SF. Karl Schroeder, Leah Silverman, Jean-Louis Trudel, Cory Doctorow, Phillip A. Hawke, Jason Kapalka, Wesley Herbert, Lydia Langstaff, Leslie Gadallah. Cover: James Beveridge.
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Peter Watts, Harold Côté, Karin Lowachee, Bonnie Blake, Kate Riedel, Wesley Herbert, Hugh A.D. Spencer, Brian Burke, Jocko, Catherine Girczyc. Cover: Jean-Pierre Normand.
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Charles de Lint, Mary E. Choo, Lesley Choyce, Marianne O. Nielsen, Braulio Tavares, Rudy Kremer, Michael Teasdale, Michael Stokes, Spider Robinson, Alice Major, Jocko, Barry Hammond, Art Feature: George Barr. Cover: Tim Hammell and Peter Renault.
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W.P. Kinsella, Alex Link, Keith Scott, Alison Baird, Marcel G. Gagné, Christopher Brayshaw, Brian Panhuyzen, Roma Quapp, William Southey, Jocko. Art Feature: Robert Pasternak. Cover: Jean-Pierre Normand.
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Theme: Horror & Dark Fantasy. Lyle Weis, Eileen Kernaghan, Peter Watts, Marie Jakober, Tanis MacDonald, Peter Darbyshire, David Nickle, L.R. Morrison. Art Feature: Peter Francis. *Nonfiction*: Barry Hammond, Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: Adrian Kleinbergen.
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Heather Spears, Brent Hayward, Mary Soon Lee, Jason Kapalka, Erik Jon Spigel, Bruce Barber, Karen Keeley Wiebe, Jan Lars Jensen, Sandra Kasturi, Kirsten Oulton. Art Feature: W.B. Johnston. *Nonfiction*: Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: W.B. Johnston.
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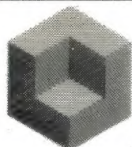
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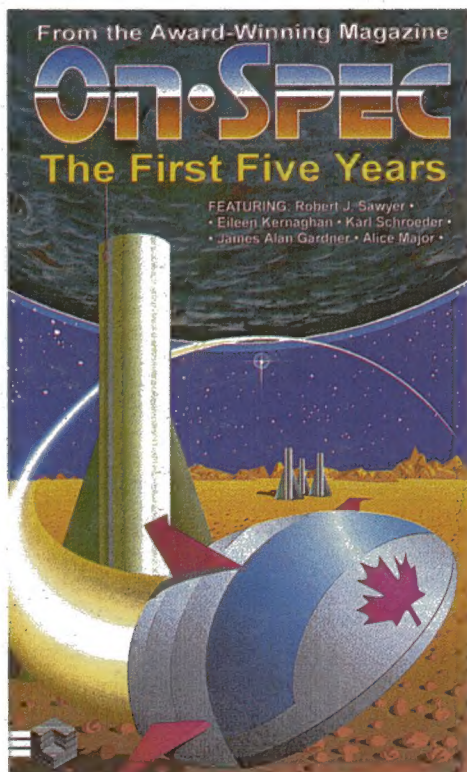
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